

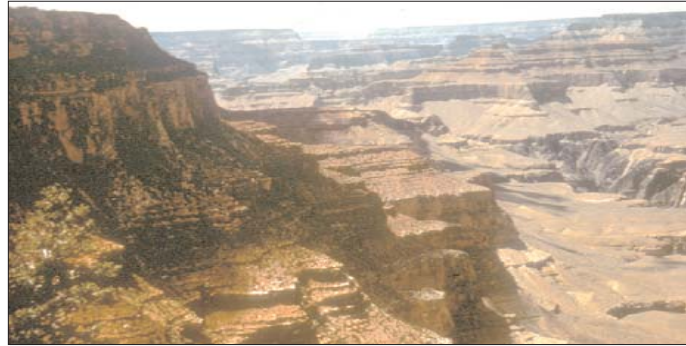
# America's Special Landscapes: The Heritage Area Phenomenon

Sarah Peskin | National Park Service | Presented at Ferrara Paesaggio Conference - Ferrara, Italy | March, 2001

Charles Eliot, a not particularly well-known but highly effective landscape planner of the 19<sup>th</sup> century likened special landscapes to works of art that should be collected and cared for as a museum does, for public benefit.<sup>1</sup> He envisioned a system of public reservations with the finest scenic and historic places in an era when his professional colleagues were more likely to focus on the design of a particular park. As a practicing planner, his work has long been of great interest to me because he was able to keep large concepts like this in mind, while he worked diligently on the day-to-day projects. Although a physical planner, he was extremely adept at using government to accomplish public goals, but also recognized the limits of what government could do, and created a novel private non-profit organization to achieve the ambitious regional land protection goals he had identified.

Eliot was largely responsible for establishing the first metropolitan park system in the United States in Boston, Massachusetts in the 1890s just before the start of an enormous suburban building boom that would have made such a system impossible. To do this, he used what we would call an inter-disciplinary approach to identify the critical elements that made the Boston region special — its tidal estuaries, forests, glacial hills, seashores, harbor islands and historic town commons. Developing a mapping overlay system that foreshadowed our modern geographic information system (GIS), he laid out a plan with representative examples of each landscape type and proceeded through his employer, the metropolitan park commission, to acquire the lands. This he accomplished in only 7 years, an impressive feat in any era, and one that adds significantly to the quality of life in Boston today. In the course of this work he recognized that there were instances where a governmental agency was not the right mechanism to perform a task. Finding no existing organization able to help and unwilling to retreat from his ambitious plan, he organized a group of like-minded civic leaders and created what exists today as the Trustees of Reservations, considered the first land trust in the United States and a model for the British National Trust and other similar organizations.

I was asked to speak to you today about new tools for American landscape protection, and also about the role of non-profit organizations — two very large topics. I like to think that if Charles



Grand Canyon National Park, Arizona



Boston Common, the oldest public park in the United States with one of the newest, Boston Harbor Islands national park area, beyond.

Eliot were alive today, he would probably work for the national park service, as I do. As a person concerned with preserving and celebrating what is best about the United States, I work for the national park service because I believe it is the entity best able to influence the future not only of our most unusual landscapes, but of the places where most Americans live their everyday lives.

And as Charles Eliot would have, we must keep in mind that although the study of landscape is certainly grounded in the physical realm, there can be no successful landscape protection if we fail to recognize that the use of land is determined by people who act within the cultural and political framework of their time.

In this paper, I will try to share with you some of what I have learned in my 20 years as a practicing planner with the national park service, and explain why I think the national park idea is helping Americans enhance the quality of their lives by giving them tools to care for the places that give their lives meaning. The national heritage area phenomenon is one such tool which is being used by coalitions of private non-profit organizations, citizens, and government to protect valued American landscapes.

Let's begin by taking a look at the American landscape and how our views of it have evolved. Now I know some of you may think of our country as the nation which gave the world fast food, suburban sprawl, and Disney Land, and some of that is certainly true. But if you look at what we treasure — the paintings in our art museums, the parks and protected areas of our national park system — you will see something else at work.

As you know, the United States is a relatively young nation, established at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century when we, like many other former colonies, balked at a far-away government making decisions on our behalf. And even when our country only included the 13 original colonies of the northeast, our national identity was based on principles strongly tied not just to any land, but to the image of a limitless wilderness of abundant forests, rich soils and bountiful waters that early settlers could claim through sheer hard work. Guided by their religious beliefs that saw nature as a force to be dominated and tamed, early settlers set to work clearing lands and developing an economy based on agriculture and resource extraction.

This history is why our national identity contains the somewhat contradictory notions of pride in a vast and untrammled wilderness, along with the firm belief that nothing is more sacred than the right of individuals to own and control private land.

The national park idea was developed in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century not by ranchers or mountain men, but by eastern intellectuals who

<sup>1</sup> Charles W. Eliot. *Charles Eliot Landscape Architect*. University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1999.



Albert Bierstadt, "The Buffalo Trail", 1867-8

saw the magnificent scenery of the west, as depicted by artists like Thomas Moran and Albert Bierstadt, as a source of national pride. Based on successful efforts to protect large tracts of scenic lands in New York and Massachusetts, the national park idea spread along with the popular images of Thomas Cole and the painters of the Hudson River School which were reproduced widely in the press. The notion that these lands should be held in trust by the American people rather than exploited by a few individuals was a new and powerful idea.

And notice that despite their potential value for future economic exploitation, these lands were set aside for their beauty. They were understood and presented as icons of our national character and important to our sense of ourselves as a nation and were compared to the cathedrals and castles that characterized the cultural riches of Europe. And because the first parks were established on land already in the public domain, they could be created relatively easily by act of Congress or by the President.

The national park idea evolved in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the establishment first of Yellowstone in 1872 followed by the addition of Sequoia and Mount Rainier national parks and of course the great Yosemite which had been created by the state of California in 1864 and later became a national park. Formally adopted as a system in 1916, the early parks established the traditions and concepts that are still very much alive today.



This view from Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park in Vermont is protected by scenic easements on privately owned lands.

The national park concept has been called the greatest idea America ever had, and compared to a fine university system with branch campuses available to citizens throughout the country. Today it includes 380 areas with more added each year, and now protects 80 million acres (33 million hectares). There are parks in 49 of the 50 states and while they vary enormously in the kinds of places they protect, all are managed with a certain amount of consistency — and it is this approach that bears watching as it is employed on lands outside the national park system.

A fundamental part of the national park idea is that these places were intended to be seen, enjoyed, and visited by the public. The

park ranger, a friendly knowledgeable person stood ready to explain the wonders of nature. Story telling has always been important in the parks.

The basic approach was simple. The federal government owned the land. Park personnel managed the parks as self-contained islands — picture those first parks which were established in many cases in lightly populated areas with no local or state government — the park superintendent was like a mayor, with an enormous amount of control over vast tracts of land. Planning was done by landscape architects, something that has been justifiably criticized recently because of its failure to base decisions on a full scientific understanding of park ecology, but this ignores the more important fact that these large parks were actually managed in accordance with master plans.<sup>2</sup> These plans were more than the simple gridded parcel maps in use at the time to divide the growing nation into townships and counties.

Early park plans identified features of significance and with the understanding that these special places would be used and enjoyed by visitors, laid out roads and facilities so that people could have an unforgettable experience.



Park Rangers in the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor foster appreciation of the landscape where people live.

And without the constraints of local zoning or other land use controls, the parks were developed in accordance with those plans. This methodology of planning with the explicit goal of protecting large important landscapes for public enjoyment differs greatly from the parallel approach that was evolving in American cities at the same time. The American system of land use control which categorizes and separates uses to protect them from each other, like the often cited slaughter house which must be prevented from locating in the residential neighborhood, makes sense when land is seen purely as a commodity and the source of the local tax base. But this system, which evolved into the local zoning and regulatory framework which still guides the accepted planning framework in American municipalities today, offers nothing to those who recognize that healthy and enjoyable communities do not just exist by accident. Land use control through zoning may protect property values but it does little to support the preservation of landscapes like the protected view from Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park in Vermont that have evolved over time in ways unique to this place.

One of the beauties of the national park system is that it was designed to be dynamic. The system was intended to grow with the addition of new units, and it was understood that policies would evolve and change over time. The 1960s were such a time of profound change for both the country and the national parks. The change I'd like to highlight has to do with the recognition that certain landscapes were enhanced by the presence of everyday structures like the modest cottages at Cape Cod National Seashore. The long-

<sup>2</sup> Richard West Sellars. *Preserving Nature in the National Parks*. Yale University Press, New Haven. 1997.

standing policy when new parks were established, such as at Shenandoah in the 1930s was to remove all traces of contemporary human habitation in the parks, and it was common practice to restore them back to an earlier time that we would recognize today



At Cape Cod National Seashore cottages like this one, that pre-dates establishment of the park, contribute to the cultural landscape.

as highly conjectural. This change came about for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was that Cape Cod was the first park established largely through many small land purchases and not set aside from already public lands or donated by wealthy individuals.

The establishment of Cape Cod was an early foray into joint management with others, municipal governments, the state of Massachusetts, and also the venerable non-profit Massachusetts Audubon Society, all of which were intensely involved in drafting the authorizing legislation and continue to be involved today. Although not the true joint management that would come later in other parks, Cape Cod was the first to have a federally established advisory commission. No more would a superintendent be able to act unilaterally on lands affecting so many. This was also the era in which the National Environmental Policy Act and Historic Preservation Act came into existence, recognizing that American citizens had a legitimate role in decisions being made about the places they valued. What followed was a period of rapid social and political change for the national park service and the country.



National heritage areas stimulate historic preservation and bring people to forgotten places to play and learn.

Immediately following this period a very new kind of national park designation emerged. Called national heritage areas, these are landscapes on the scale of the great national parks, but with one remarkable difference. They are inhabited by people. And these people continue to own the land and go about their business, but something new is at work here. These are places where people are conscious not only that they live in an area of historical importance, or scenic value, but that they need to work on a regional scale and with multiple layers of government and non-profit organizations to make sure their region maintains its integrity.

There are now 23 federally designated heritage areas in the U.S. and well over 100 locally or state designated areas using similar measures to protect a huge variety of landscapes. While these would probably look quite familiar to those of you who know the British system of protected landscapes or the French regional parks, these areas have a distinctly American feel to them that evolved directly from the

national park service's planning and management approach.

The official definition states that a national heritage area is a *place designated by Congress where natural, cultural, historic and scenic resources combine to form a cohesive, nationally distinctive landscape arising from patterns of human activity shaped by geography.*<sup>3</sup>

Let's take a look at a few of these areas and the features that they have in common. Although efforts to create them in any kind of centralized systematic way have been soundly defeated every time this has been proposed to Congress, they bear a striking similarity to each other. They are also remarkably similar to Lowell National Historical Park, established in 1979, the first truly collaborative national park unit which was where I began my career in the national park service.

I have identified seven key components of a successful heritage area, and all can be found to varying degrees in the 23 designated areas. These are:

**1. They originate from grass roots political activism which continues into management.**



I cannot overemphasize this characteristic. Heritage areas can take ten or more years to establish and must be maintained through the constant efforts of unpaid volunteers. In the Blackstone Valley and along the Erie Canal citizen efforts succeeded in getting once polluted rivers cleaned of industrial waste. Continued use by walkers, cyclists, paddlers and frequent activities for volunteers makes sure that there are lots of watchdogs to alert others if new threats arise.

**2. They include historic buildings and cultural landscapes shaped by people. There is considerable involvement by the private sector and non-profit organizations**

Preservation and adaptive reuse of historic structures is the hallmark of areas like Lowell. A planning system that identifies a shared vision for a region makes it easier to find roles for private investors and other strong players. All the areas have governing boards to coordinate their activities although their form varies.

**3. Stories, music, foodways, walking tours, boat rides and celebrations are used rather than regulations to encourage care for special places. Heritage areas are fun.**

Festivals and special events enrich all the heritage areas. They provide a vehicle for marketing an area and get lots of free news media coverage. Some of the interesting techniques used include calendars of events which are shared with the many small church and civic groups in the region for dissemination to their members, and producing television shows on the history, music and traditions of the area for broadcast on public access stations. The Quinebaug-

<sup>3</sup> National Park Service policy statement 1998.

Shetucket area in Connecticut has a singer and songwriter who performs at schools and other venues around the region, frequently accompanied by children who are taught the songs she has written and collected about historical figures from their region. In the Smokestacks and Silos area in Iowa, the region's agricultural character is protected by bringing people together to celebrate their local customs and traditions.

**4. Important landscapes are kept in private ownership, although this may mean by land trusts or local park agencies for lands with public access.**



Silos and Smokestacks National Heritage Area, Iowa

Land ownership does not normally change to accomplish the goals of a heritage area and no federal land acquisition is authorized by the legislation establishing the areas. In the Essex Heritage Area superb properties of the Trustees of Reservations are included in the information system of signs and brochures.

This is the same organization founded by Charles Eliot at about the same time as the national park system and is representative of a robust land protection effort by similar organizations around the U.S. The Land Trust Alliance reports that 1200 such groups exist including the large ones like the Nature Conservancy as well as hundreds of local ones who hold land or interests in land on behalf of the public. The national park service has worked with such organizations for years, particularly with those that acquire lands for subsequent sale or donation to the national park system. As private, trusted groups, they can often act quickly and take risks that a government agency cannot. Private donors often feel more comfortable dealing with a non-profit. Land trusts have been particularly active in the last 10 years, and now protect close to 5 million acres in the U.S.

**5. Regional economic development is a goal and to do this localities work on a larger regional scale than they had before.**

Cultural tourism is a goal of most heritage areas and most develop signs and literature to market the area. Economic development may also take the form of revitalizing abandoned factories for new high-tech use. The inter-governmental management entities for the heritage areas are in a good position to assist a potential new employer to locate in the area. Other key organizations are museums and universities which are components of most of the heritage areas. While the first heritage areas were in economically distressed regions, we are now seeing areas like the Champlain Valley which seeks to strengthen its cultural tourism while retaining a good balance between economic development and maintaining the local way of life.

**6. The national park service is involved for a finite period of time, typically with planning, organization of a management entity, helping to identify unifying themes for interpretation and furnishing of grant monies.**

In areas like the Blackstone Valley where there is an established national park service presence in the form of paid professional staff support-

ing the activities of citizens, signs of success are tangible. Projects requiring coordination and technical expertise like regional sign systems, museum exhibits, trail construction and historic preservation benefit from this expertise. The national park service approach to planning is applied to an inhabited area.

It is somewhat ironic that the very success of the heritage area movement is proving problematic to the national park service and to the federal government which funds its operations. Although funding for the current heritage areas is relatively modest — about \$1 million per year per area — the number of areas is ever increasing and their political clout is a force to be reckoned with.

I believe this trend will continue and hope that the areas maintain a cooperative relationship with the national park service so that each may use others strengths to expand the sources of funding. In this way both approaches will flourish.



Acadia National Park, Maine

And what advice would our wise friend Charles Eliot have for us today here in the Po delta region? I think he would urge us to use the technological and scientific tools available to us to better understand and care for the places that help define us. No doubt he would be very pleased to see that the non-profit land trust he created is still alive and well and part of a healthy national network of such organizations. I suspect he would be intrigued by the advances in ecological planning now being taught at our universities and used by our land managing entities. And I think he would urge us to work diligently to make sure the heritage areas and the national parks — our most special places — continue to offer an alternative to the all too common landscape of sprawl that threatens our scenery and our national psyche.

Clearly the entire United States and all of Italy cannot and should not be set aside as government owned national parks. But should we encourage citizens to identify and understand what is distinctive about their regions and support strategies for celebrating and protecting those places for current and future generations? I think we all know the answer, and it is certainly, yes!

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