

National Heritage Areas in the West

Heritage areas are large living landscapes where community residents have adopted a strategy to work collaboratively across both programmatic and political boundaries. They are places where communities have hammered out a common vision based on a region's shared heritage. It is a strategy to achieve conservation in concert with compatible economic development, whether renewing traditional economic pursuits or finding new ways to sustain the people who give the landscape life. The goal is to conserve both natural and cultural resources, to maintain community vitality and to manage change without losing an area's spirit of place.

Those interested in historic preservation recognize the benefits of this new collaborative approach that embraces whole landscape preservation and brings new partners to the table to tell richer stories and tackle daunting preservation projects. The heritage area approach is successful because it addresses not just the needs of the built environment, but also the needs of the people that live in that built environment.

Today there are twenty-three congressionally designated national heritage areas and corridors and more than a dozen proposals for additional areas. The national heritage areas receive assistance from the National Park Service in planning, resource conservation, and funding. However, the heritage area idea is not unique to the National Park Service and it is growing in popularity at every level of government. A number of new state heritage programs have joined the established ones in New York and Pennsylvania and literally hundreds of regional grassroots initiatives are underway across the country.

Until recently most of the national heritage areas were located in the east and encompassed iconic landscapes such as the Hudson River Valley National Heritage Area and coastal New England in the Essex National Heritage Area or stories of our industrial might from the Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area in Pittsburgh to the Automobile National Heritage Area in Southeast Michigan. The fragmented nature of local governments and the complex layering of historical stories in the east made a cooperative approach to conservation and redevelopment a necessary strategy. The west has been slower to follow this path. The only western nationally designated heritage areas are the Cache La Poudre River Corridor in Colorado established in 1996 as the first area in the western United States and the Yuma Crossing National Heritage Area in Arizona, which was created in 2000.

It is fitting that both of these heritage areas focus on the key organizing principle in the history of this part of the country, the management and allocation of water. The Cache La Poudre River Corridor, for example, was in the forefront of the development of water law in the west. The legal doctrine of "prior appropriation" was developed to resolve issues between the water users in Greeley and Fort Collins along the Cache La Poudre River. In addition the innovations in water delivery and measurement systems that evolved along the river have been widely adopted and are recognized as nationally significant. The region around what is today Yuma, Arizona, first developed as one of the only reliable

crossing point of the Colorado River for Native Americans and later European travelers. It was known for its innovative water management in the 19th century including the development of the Yuma siphon and in this century for its leadership in environmental restoration of the lower Colorado River.

In Colorado's Cache La Poudre Corridor local citizens have formed a non-profit organization the Poudre Heritage Alliance to advance the goals of the heritage area. Working in partnership with the National Park Service (Technical staff) and with neighboring Rocky Mountain National Park, the heritage area has developed a web site, a photographic and electronic database, and has inventoried water-related structures, landscapes and other resources. Corridor wide interpretive signage will be installed in the coming year. As Richard Brady, the Chair of the Poudre Heritage Alliance, says, "The Poudre River is a living history lesson. A water system that is evolving, but still functioning much the way it did a century ago".

The heritage area approach of local leadership and management of natural and cultural resources makes the idea an appealing one for western communities. Charles Flynn, executive director of the Yuma Crossing National Heritage Area, described the process of creating a heritage area as giving his community a sense of control of their destiny in a region with an overwhelming federal presence. The region was able to reach consensus on plans for the future and enlist both federal agencies and the Quechen and Cocopah Indian Nations as partners. In the 108th Congress bills to designate heritage area have been introduced for the Great Basin Nevada and Utah, the Mormon Pioneer Trail in Utah, and the Northern Rio Grande in New Mexico. A bill to study the Four Corners region for potential designation is also under consideration.

Forty-five million people live within the boundaries of existing national heritage areas. The proposed new western areas would showcase strong partnerships with National Park units, spectacular landscapes, diverse stories, and even more people. For this reason alone the National Park Service and all organizations that care about conserving the American landscape should look closely at this phenomenon. This new path offers the potential to view historic preservation's mission in a broader context and to build needed support among residents and their political leaders.

For more information, visit: www.cr.nps.gov/heritageareas