

National Heritage Areas: Developing a Model for Measuring Success

A. National Heritage Areas within a national and international context

Heritage areas and heritage corridors are large-scale living landscapes where community leaders and residents have come together around a common vision of their shared heritage. The process of developing a heritage area utilizes a strategy that encourages collaboration across political and programmatic boundaries on a plan for the conservation of valued assets in concert with compatible economic and community development. Overcoming obstacles to such partnerships is possible because the heritage area addresses the needs of the people who live in the landscape as well as the needs of their environment. The goals of most heritage areas are ambitious: to conserve both natural and cultural resources, to maintain community vitality and to manage change while retaining an area's sense of identity.

Today, there are twenty-four congressionally designated national heritage areas and corridors in the United States.¹ Additionally, there are more than a dozen proposed for designation and almost that many for further study in the 108th Congress. The National Park Service has already been directed to study an additional four areas.² The heritage area concept and regional collaborative strategies extend beyond the Federal government to the states as well. Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania and Utah have heritage area programs, and there are hundreds of grassroots initiatives across the country.

The idea of working in partnership with residents and other partners to conserve significant living landscapes is not new. On the international level, there is increasing recognition that these landscapes have value and that their conservation can only occur in concert with local communities. Adrian Phillips, Senior Advisor to the International Union on the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) on World Heritage has written and spoken persuasively on the management of protected areas in cooperation with local people for multiple objectives.³ In the United States, while the recent trend has been to bring parks and people more closely together, it is something new to consider peopled landscapes as protected areas. The barriers to recognizing and managing large and complex landscapes have seemed largely insurmountable without the use of regulatory power to direct or curb changes to resources.

With this perspective on the challenges of valuation and management of large living landscapes, the National Park Service's conservation role in these landscapes continues to evolve. The first national heritage initiative, Illinois and Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor, was designated as recently as 1984. The 97-mile canal corridor connected Lake Michigan to the Illinois River and on to the Mississippi via a long used Indian portage. Encompassing 1,067 units of local government, an active ship canal and the remnants of the 1848 canal now managed by the State of Illinois as a park, the area displays both the scale and multi-jurisdictional nature of later heritage area proposals.⁴ Most significantly, the area was to be managed not by the National Park Service in a traditional, hierarchical manner, but by a Federal Commission representing the interests and expertise of the local community.⁵ This shift toward local control has become even more pronounced in recent years with the shift away from Federal

Commissions, which are at least nominally Federal authorities, toward more flexible non-profit organizations.⁶ More recently, the agency's role has been limited to evaluating the feasibility and appropriateness of national designation,⁷ providing assistance in the development of area management plans and offering technical assistance on resource conservation and interpretation.

The agency has continued to maintain a clear separation between units of the National Park System⁸ and national heritage areas. However, there is growing recognition that the heritage area strategy could provide significant value as a technique to develop a stewardship ethic in gateway communities and in landscapes around national parks. Cane River Creole National Historical Park and the Cane River National Heritage Area in Natchitoches, Louisiana were created within the same legislation in 1994 to preserve significant landscapes, sites and structures associated with Creole culture in both urban and rural settings. The park owns only 62 acres within its boundaries. The national heritage area includes 45,000 acres. While this example is the most intentional adoption of unified strategies, many national parks have found heritage areas to be strong partners in interpretation, historic preservation, land conservation and fund-raising.⁹

B. The Challenge of Developing a Program

With the increase in the number of national heritage areas and legislative proposals has come a renewed demand from congress and the administration for a national policy to set standards and criteria for the establishment of new areas.¹⁰ Even more challenging is the demand for clear measures to assess the benefit to both resources and communities of the program's Federal investment and intervention. The growth of the National Park Service's programs and holdings has always been a dialogue between national goals and public demand.¹¹ The model of the great western parks carved out of public lands has been added to and amended for over fifty years with the addition of battlefields, memorial parkways, seashores, trails, and initiatives such as the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom. Each of these designations and the complex new ideas that they represent has challenged the agency to think of new ways to conserve and interpret resources and brought them into closer contact with communities and the people who live there.¹² However, no idea has been as hard to conceptualize and reduce to standards, criteria and measures of public benefit than that of national heritage areas.¹³

A generation ago, when the legislation passed for the first national heritage corridor, the National Park Service had no intention of creating a whole new category of designations. After several more were enacted and many more were proposed, both Congress and the agency developed several programmatic and statutory approaches. There were many counter currents during this effort; some wished to harness the idea for broad landscape stewardship goals and others tried to rein in the idea as costly and unproven. Some resisted any standardization that might inhibit creativity and others, alarmed that the program threatened property rights, saw it as the first step toward Federal land use control. While no agreement could be reached on an overall program approach, congress and the administration were able to agree on a formula that set funding and time limits for the more recently designated areas on a case-by-case basis.¹⁴

Within the last two years, the idea of a national program has become more acceptable to all parties. In part, this happening because there is a greater understanding of what makes these areas successful. Criteria have been developed, at least on paper, to ensure that community residents and leaders are fully consulted and committed before designation.¹⁵ There is also

general consensus that these areas, to justify the Federal government's involvement, should contain nationally important resources and interpretive themes.

Still under discussion is how many national heritage areas should be created, what the long-term relationship should be between the National Park Service and the areas and how to respond to proposals to extend funding support for areas that are reaching the end of their authorization. Finally, it is becoming more critical than ever to demonstrate what impact Federal investment is having on heritage area goals of improving the conservation and interpretation of resources and the economic viability and sustainability of communities.¹⁶

C. Using Data Collection to Understand Heritage Areas and Shape Future Policy

Mounting pressures at the Federal level to create criteria and guidance that guarantees the economic value and long-term "success" of heritage areas have led the National Park Service to utilize four concurrent data collection methods to attempt to quantify the physical, social, and economic characteristics of existing heritage areas and to create program accountability. Figure 1 demonstrates the categories of data that provide a basis for understanding and measuring the climate and impacts of heritage areas.

The first category (I) describes social, economic and resource characteristics of the regions. Category two (II) describes additional overlapping designations, programs, and resources. The third category (III) counts heritage area-sponsored education and grants programs, partnerships and impacts of heritage tourism impacts. Category four (IV) reflects the aggregate economic leveraging impact of National Park Service appropriations. The fifth category (V) measures the regional economic impacts of heritage tourism.¹⁷ While some of the data being collected reflects the direct impacts of the presence of a heritage area, other categories are only informative of existing conditions. A major challenge lies in determining what programs and impacts can be attributed to heritage area activity.

Figure 1. Categories of data collection

Data collection category	Purpose	Types of information	Sources	Reflected values and impacts
I. Baseline	describes social, economic and resource characteristics	Population, age, race, income, unemployment, poverty, congressional representation, area, government, National Register and National Historic Landmarks listings, grants and tax credit projects	U.S. Census Bureau and National Park Service	social, historical, economic
II. Additional designations, programs and resources	indicates overlapping designations and resources, economic development and resource protection activities	Federally managed parcels of land, designations and management by national conservation and preservation organizations (National Trust for Historic Preservation, National Scenic Byways, American Heritage Rivers)	websites and staff of Federal agencies and national organizations	historic, cultural, natural, recreational
III. Indicators	indicates impacts/change more directly attributable to heritage area designation	Visitation, volunteerism, formal and informal partnerships, grants and enhancements to trails and historic properties, educational programs and participants	annual survey to designated areas	cultural, recreational, partnership
IV. Leveraging	assesses economic value and impact of Federal investment in local initiatives	National Park Service Heritage Partnerships Program Funding, Transportation Enhancements, Other Federal, state, local, private and non-profit	annual survey to designated areas	economic, partnership
V. Impacts of heritage tourism	measures the economic impacts of visitor spending on the surrounding region	Michigan State University modified Money Generation Model (MGM2)	visitor surveys collected at visitors' centers and major attractions in six heritage areas	economic, social

While data collection on national heritage areas is still in its early stages, preliminary findings provide some insights into both the characteristics of these areas and the outcomes of their efforts. For example, Category I information demonstrates that 20% of all National Historic Landmarks¹⁸ are located within the boundaries of national heritage areas. This indicator supports the national importance of the resources and themes of these areas. Category III information demonstrates that in 2003, heritage areas awarded 367 grants overall, which leveraged \$29,276,585. 67 of these grants were awarded for trails projects. 513 educational programs reached 740,775 students in 2003. These numbers indicate significant progress toward the areas' stated program goals of resource conservation and education. As this information is gathered on an annual basis, overall conservation and stewardship impact can be tracked.

The goal of assisting regions with community and economic revitalization is reflected in both Categories III and IV. An estimated 31.6 million people visited heritage area attractions in 2003 (Category III), and a recently completed economic impact study on heritage tourism piloted by six of the national heritage areas demonstrates the impact of that number on the heritage regions. Michigan State University based this modified study on the Money Generation Model (MGM) long used by National Park units.¹⁹ Preliminary findings have been so insightful that the remaining 18 areas will be encouraged to participate in future studies. Measuring the impacts of heritage tourism at a regional level helps the areas gain local and Congressional support and offers them insight into how to better reach their constituents.

The data collection from category III reflects some less tangible impacts of heritage areas on their regions. The national heritage areas reported that in 2003 they participated in over 3,000 partnerships and generated 167,000 hours of volunteer service. Partnership commitment is also reflected in the amount of money that national heritage areas have leveraged with National Park Service funding: partners committed over eight times as much money from a diversified mixture of Federal, state, local, and private funding sources.²⁰ Category IV information is demonstrating

to congressional appropriators, donors, potential partners and investors the economic value of utilizing the heritage area strategy.

D. Furthering the Agenda--Hypothesis of Change

Another area of inquiry involves looking at the characteristics of regions that adopt the heritage areas strategy. Preliminary demographic and resource data suggests that certain factors set heritage areas apart from other landscapes. All of the heritage areas are or were “working landscapes”—their conservation and interpretation centers on a way of life that is becoming or has become obsolete. Particularly in the Northeast, heritage areas are regions that have experienced more out-migration than elsewhere in the country between 1995 and 2000.²¹ Across the country, data from Category I shows that heritage areas have a higher percentage of the population over 65 than their state, and the average percentage of persons over 65 is higher than the national average, at 12.4% and 14.3% respectively.²² While these findings are not definitive, they do point to stress within a community as a factor in heritage area formation.

Whether the region is gaining or losing population, jobs, and young people, the desire to manage change brings people of diverse races, interests, economic and social backgrounds together. Figure 2 illustrates one way of categorizing the areas in order to better understand and assess the complex shifts occurring and how heritage areas might more effectively address concerns about social, economic and resource change. Drawing correlations between the characteristics of the landscape, the stresses occurring there, and the responses may shed light on why heritage areas form and how they can become successful at achieving their goals.

Figure 2. Heritage area change

Heritage Area	Traditional economic base	Geographic landscape linkages	Type of change occurring	Mitigation techniques
Blackstone, Augusta, Cane River, D&L, Erie, Hudson, I&M, O&E, Yuma, Cache La Poudre, Wheeling Lackawanna, Rivers of Steel, National Coal, MotorCities, Blackstone, Path of Progress	transportation	canal or waterway	Obsolete transportation corridors--regional loss of identity, depopulation	recreational trails and scenic byways (reconnecting transportation linkages), education
	industry	historic mills, factories plants and associated landscape formations	obsolete or severely declining industry--coal, steel, mining, textiles and manufacturing--depopulation	adaptive re-use, interpretation of industrial history, tourism (new uses for vacant structures)
Essex	maritime	water, colonial-era historic structures	development, loss of connection with history	tourism, interpretation and managed growth
South Carolina, Q&S, Silos and Smokestacks, Hudson	agricultural	farmland and rural landscape	shift in use of land from agricultural to residential	conservation, tourism
Tennessee, Shenandoah	agriculture/ hybrid/ battlefield sites	battlefields and related historic sites, rural landscape	development, loss of connection with history	battlefield and site protection, interpretation

E. What next? Impacts and Future Research

Preliminary data collected on the heritage areas has been utilized to explain and justify the value of heritage area designation. The data is appearing in Congressional testimonies, National Park Service Special Resources Studies for proposed heritage areas, and in the literature of the heritage areas.²³ The data collection is shaping draft program legislation and program direction. The information is also providing a more comprehensive picture of the national significance of

the regions, which will improve technical assistance in the future, and highlights the Federal, state and local partners and programs within the regions that can provide future partnership opportunities. Data collection is also provoking a deeper questioning of the theoretical aspects of heritage development, and creating dialog that explores the larger social and value-based questions upon which the future of the movement will depend.

In addition to numbers collection and surveying, a series of workshops has brought professionals and academics together to discuss what is needed to further understanding and assessment of the present and future of the heritage movement. Future outcomes of these workshops may include the development of a centralized database of legislation, management models, plans, and case studies, a publication series of best practices and guidelines, and an academic research forum to explore the impetus, practice, policy and impacts of heritage development.²⁴

Due to funding and timing constraints, initial data collection has been focused on quantifiable things, which does not fully capture the impacts of heritage areas on the quality of life that the areas are attempting to preserve—intangible values that have made regions culturally or socially cohesive in the past. A model needs to be developed that accurately measures true heritage area “success,” that considers both quantitative and qualitative data and draws stronger correlations between heritage area designation and management and its long-term impacts on the values that residents hold dear. Research and data collection will undoubtedly evolve over time to encompass a broader range of resources and to identify the specific impacts that heritage areas are having on regions, people and resources. Alternative conservation and international models, such as the Northern Forest Wealth Index and Quality of Life Reports completed in New Zealand and Canada,²⁵ will shape a new model for measuring the short and long-term successes of heritage area activities in communities undergoing change and stress.

F. Heritage Areas at the Crossroads

Heritage areas tend to occur where the linkages between people and place, nature and culture, and the present and the past are traditionally connected, but currently threatened or weak. Heritage areas focus on rebuilding these linkages through, resource conservation, new partnerships and economic development. At this critical juncture in heritage development, as the future of heritage area policy is being determined, measuring, assessing and understanding heritage areas will provide the national government and the heritage areas with information to improve the program and judge its ultimate success.

¹ The most recent heritage area, the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area in North Carolina, was designated as part of the Interior appropriations bill in December 2003 (P.L.108-108).

² The National Park Service has been directed by Congress to undertake studies of the Buffalo Bayou in Houston Texas, Low Country Gullah Culture in South Carolina and Georgia, Muscle Shoals in Alabama, and Niagara Falls in New York for possible heritage area designation

³ Phillips, Adrian, 2003, *Turning Ideas on Their Head: The New Paradigm of Protected Areas*, The George Wright Forum Vol.20 No. 2, The George Wright Society. Adrian Phillips has made presentations on this theme at the International Heritage Development Conference in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania in June 2003 and at the Fifth World Parks Congress “Benefits Beyond Boundaries” in Durban.

⁴ For more information on the Illinois and Michigan Canal National Corridor visit the following websites at <http://www.nps.gov/ilmi/home.htm> and <http://www.canalcor.org>.

⁵ Members of the Illinois and Michigan Canal Corridor Commission include representatives of local government, the forest preserve district, five members with expertise in resource disciplines such as archaeology, conservation, history, historic preservation and recreation, five with expertise in business and industry and a representative of the National Park Service.

⁶ At this time, 6 of the national heritage areas have Federal commissions, and 16 are managed by state agencies or nonprofit organizations.

⁷ The specific criteria for designation may be found on the National Park Services web site at <http://www.cr.nps.gov/heritageareas/>. The agency has identified four critical factors for a successful national heritage area: 1) Completion of a suitability/feasibility study 2) Public involvement in the suitability and feasibility study 3) Demonstration of widespread public support among the area residents for the proposal 4) Commitment to the proposal from key constituents which may include government, industry and private nonprofit organizations in addition to area residents.

⁸ National Park Service, 1999, *The National Parks: Index 1999-2001*, US Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. Popularly known as the index, the booklet includes over twenty classifications in the National Park System including battlefields, historic sites, lakeshores, monuments, parkways, rivers and riverways, trails and seashores. The national heritage areas are included in the *Index*, but are not considered part of the National Park System

⁹ Other examples include the Essex National Heritage Area in Massachusetts, which has a close relationship including a shared visitor center with Salem Maritime Historic Site and the Ohio and Erie National Heritage CanalWay which expands the reach of Cuyahoga National Park north to Cleveland and south beyond Akron along the Ohio and Erie Canal.

¹⁰ Legislation has been introduced since 1993 to establish a programmatic approach to the creation of national heritage areas. However, congress has not been able to agree on the terms of designation

¹¹ Barrett, Brenda and Nora Mitchell, Eds., 2003, *Stewardship of Heritage Areas*, The George Wright Forum Vol. 20 N0. 2, The George Wright Society. This issue of the The George Wright Forum examines the development of the national heritage area movement and its relationship to National Park Service.

¹² National Park Service, 2003, *Branching Out: Approaches in National Park Stewardship*, Eastern National, Fort Washington, Pennsylvania, USA. The booklet provides an excellent overview of the diversity of ways that the National Park Service designations and program have met the challenge of stewardship of the natural and cultural environment

¹³ Ibid, pp. 50-59.

¹⁴ The formula which has been applied to most heritage areas created after 1996 is \$10 million dollars over 15 years with no more than \$1 million dollars in any single year.

¹⁵ For information on the national heritage area criteria see footnote 7 above.

¹⁶ The United States Senate, lead by Senator Thomas (R-WY) Chair of the Subcommittee on National Parks, has taken an active interest in the future of the national heritage area program. The Senate held an oversight hearing on the topic on March 13, 2002, requested assistance from the National Park Service Director Mainella in defining the purpose of the program and in developing "metrics for assessing progress" (March 21, 2003), and requested a review of the program by the General Accounting Office (May 1, 2003).

¹⁷ The modified Money Generation Model (MGM2), developed by Michigan State University, considers the broader impacts that visitors to major visitor centers and attractions have on the surrounding region. The six areas are Silos and Smokestacks, Lackawanna Heritage Valley, Cane River National Heritage Area, Essex National Heritage Area, Augusta Canal National Heritage Area, and Ohio & Erie National Heritage CanalWay.

¹⁸ National Historic Landmarks are defined by the National Park Service as "...nationally significant historic places designated by the Secretary of Interior because they possess exceptional value or quality in illustrating or interpreting the heritage of the United States."

¹⁹ For more information on the work of Michigan State University and the Money Generation Model, see <http://www.prr.msu.edu/mgm2/default.htm>, retrieved February 20, 2004.

²⁰ In 2002, the 23 national heritage areas were surveyed to determine the leveraging ratio of National Park Service Heritage Partnerships Funding to other Federal, state, local, private and non-profit income. The leveraging percentages are available at <http://www.cr.nps.gov/heritageareas/research/>.

²¹ The Northeast lost 1.2 million residents between 1995 and 2000. See <http://www.census.gov/population/cen2000/> for regional population statistics.

²² U.S. Census Bureau statistics on age demographics are available by county for 1990 and 2000 at <http://www.census.gov>.

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- ²³ Examples can be found in the National Park Service's Gullah/Guchee Draft Special Resource Study; Congressional testimony on October 16, 2003 on H.R. 1862, and in the 2003 Annual Report on the National Heritage Areas, produced in partnership with the Alliance of National Heritage Areas and the National Park Service.
- ²⁴ Workshop reports and additional information available at <http://www.cr.nps.gov/heritageareas/REP/research.htm>.
- ²⁵ *The Northern Forest Wealth Index: Exploring a Deeper Meaning of Wealth*. Concord, NH: Northern Forest Center, 2000. *Quality of Life Report 2003*. Wellington, NZ: 2003. Available at <http://www.bigcities.govt.nz>, retrieved 20 Feb. 2004. *Quality of Life in Canada: A Citizen's Report Card*. Canadian Policy Research Network: 2002. Available at <http://www.cprn.com/en/doc.cfm?doc=44>, retrieved 20 Feb. 2004.