

AN EVALUATION OF 12 NATIONAL HERITAGE AREAS

In 2016, the National Park Service will celebrate its 100th birthday. By any objective measure, the past century has been a resounding success for the National Park Service as it has evolved into the most effective natural and historic resource preservation institution in the world. But despite its past success, future challenges abound. Not the least of these will be in the area of funding.

In August of 2011, Congress enacted legislation that will reduce government-wide federal spending by more than \$1 trillion over the next decade. Like other federal agencies and departments, this action will necessarily constrain federal funding of the National Park System. At the same time, the American public has not shown any sign of tiring of their national parks or desiring reductions in park opportunities. This is especially true in growing urban areas. To meet these seemingly incongruent realities, the National Park Service will be required to appreciably expand its current use of public-private partnerships.

National Heritage Areas are a model for how such partnerships can create dynamic, business-oriented approaches to our nation's preservation and conservation opportunities and needs. National Heritage Areas, some of which have been in operation for more than two decades, are grassroots, community-driven organizations that enhance local economic development by bringing to life historic preservation, natural resource conservation, recreation, and heritage tourism projects at a fraction of the cost of a traditional national park. By working in conjunction with local business and civic leaders, National Heritage Areas have significantly compounded the effectiveness of federal tax dollars by routinely leveraging these dollars four-fold and undertaking the timely implementation of projects in a more entrepreneurial environment.

The National Park Service has said National Heritage Areas "...strengthen, complement, and support units of the national park system." As Congress and the American people look forward to the National Park Service's second century, the National Heritage Areas stand ready to assist the National Park Service in replicating the outstanding accomplishments of the first one-hundred years.

National Park Services Evaluations Find National Heritage Areas are Achieving their Purpose and Accomplishing their Goals

At the request of Congress, the National Park Service (NPS) commissioned a series of evaluations reviewing the accomplishments of nine of the longstanding National Heritage Areas (NHA). Conducted primarily by Westat, an external evaluation firm, these comprehensive assessments were informed by earlier NPS research and evaluations on three of the earliest areas.

The evaluations reported very positive findings¹. Almost every one of the NHAs:

- **Addressed the goals identified in the NHA's authorizing legislation and general management plan.** The reports documented that funding was allocated to achieve the NHAs programmatic objectives:

- Cultural and Natural Resource Conservation 31 percent
- Education and Interpretation 26 percent
- Also important were Recreational Development, Marketing and Economic Development accomplished primarily through heritage tourism.

- **Leveraged NPS Heritage Area Funding** with other Federal, state, local and private sources to implement planned conservation, recreation and economic development projects. The NPS funding was identified as the consistent, flexible seed money for the projects. NHAs met and in most cases exceeded the 50 percent required match, used the NPS funds responsibly to meet program goals, and leveraged additional funds for heritage infrastructure at a ratio of 4-to-1.

- **Employed a management structure, partnerships, and current funding levels to contribute to the NHA's sustainability.** The NHAs have developed an engaged public, effective board governance structure, capable and experienced leadership and staff, and responsible fiscal management.

However, the evaluations also concluded that in every case the loss of NPS funding would reduce the capacity and flexibility of the NHA to achieve the statutory mission of the organization and in a majority of cases would threaten the area's viability or very existence.

¹One National Heritage Area struggled with changes in management structure and financial uncertainty. The evaluation found that it stayed true to its mission, but expended limited NPS funds and was able to address only half of their program goals.

Evaluation Legislation, P. L. 110-229, May 8, 2008

For the nine National Heritage Areas authorized in Division II of the Omnibus Parks and Public Lands Management Act of 1996, not later than 3 years before the date on which authority for Federal funding terminates for each National Heritage Area, the Secretary shall--

(1) conduct an evaluation of the accomplishments of the National Heritage Area; and

(2) prepare a report in accordance with subsection (c).

(b) Evaluation.--An evaluation conducted under subsection (a)(1) shall--

(1) assess the progress of the local management entity with respect to:

(A) accomplishing the purposes of the authorizing legislation for the National Heritage Area; and

(B) achieving the goals and objectives of the approved management plan for the National Heritage Area;

(2) analyze the investments of Federal, State, Tribal, and local government and private entities in each National Heritage Area to determine the impact of the investments; and

(3) review the management structure, partnership relationships, and funding of the National Heritage Area for purposes of identifying the critical components for sustainability of the National Heritage Area.

(c) Report.--Based on the evaluation conducted under subsection (a)(1), the Secretary shall submit a report to the Committee on Natural Resources of the United States House of Representatives and the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources of the Senate. The report shall include recommendations for the future role of the National Park Service, if any, with respect to the National Heritage Area.

Key Findings - National Heritage Areas:

Demonstrate Fiscal Responsibility – The evaluation reports found responsible financial practices. Every NHA had an audited financial statement. Every NHA met or exceeded the required match to the NPS funds. In many cases NHAs leveraged significant investment dollars for program and capital projects. For example, the Augusta Canal NHA matched \$5.2 million of Federal funds with \$21 million from other grants and revenues.

Preserve Nationally Significant Resources – The evaluations documented that all NHAs were conserving and interpreting cultural and natural resources of national significance. These include the iconic landscapes of the Hudson River Valley NHA as well as the sites and stories of the steel industry in Pittsburgh. The Rivers of Steel NHA has protected the Carrie Furnace, the adjacent Hot Metal Bridge and restored the Bost Building, all three National Historic Landmarks, along with the Pump House, another nationally significant site contributing to of labor history. The Homestead Historic District and Carrie Furnace Landmark site are undergoing a multi-million restoration with state, local, private and federal funds for a mixed-use industrial and commercial development.

Rely on Public Participation and Partnerships – The reports confirm that NHAs implement their management plans through partnerships and with a high level of continued citizen involvement in all their work with the public. The strength of the area’s partnerships are well documented. Most areas manage by developing an extensive network of partnerships. For example, Silos and Smokestacks has 108 formal partners in 37 counties, Tennessee Civil War made 306 consultations, and the South Carolina National Heritage Area has 175 community partners. **An important partner is the National Park Service.** The Cane River National Heritage Area preserves the living cultural traditions for the Cane River National Historic Site, and Essex National Heritage provides the landscape setting for the Salem Maritime National Historic Site. In return, both NHAs receive invaluable technical assistance in their programming from NPS.

Show Effective Management – The reports noted that in general, the leaders of NHA organizations have exceptional skills in partnership development, strategic planning and longevity with their organization and have established themselves as reliable and credible partners in the communities where they work. Also documented was good use of adaptive management strategies that reflected changing public needs. The reports singled out Hudson River Valley, Rivers of Steel, and Silos and Smokestacks for their adaptive approaches.

Provide Lessons in working at a Landscape Scale – Also reported was an increase in the regional sense of place and sense of pride. This is apparent in all NHAs, but particularly evident in the extensive interviews used to evaluate the Blackstone River Valley, Cane River and Delaware and Lehigh NHAs, which all documented an increase in connectivity and understanding of the regional framework and the importance of their preservation.

Programmatic Accomplishments

Cultural and Natural Resource Conservation – The highest priority work for all 12 of the NHAs based on project funding was resource conservation. The nine recent evaluations documented that an average of 31 percent of the areas’ programmatic dollars were invested in this type of work. Projects included the restoration of canals, landmark properties, documentation of historic churches in Tennessee Civil War, and environmental remediation of the Blackstone River and Augusta Canal.

Education and Interpretation – The second highest priority for all 12 areas is educating residents and visitors about the history of the region and building appreciation for the special qualities of the man-made and natural landscape, as well as the culture and people. The nine most recent evaluations showed that on average 26 percent of programmatic dollars went into this activity. Essex NHA connected their region with signage, visitor centers and reinforced the message with special events and educational programming. Silos and Smokestacks NHA overcomes great distances with the award winning Camp Silos which provides an online experience to over 500,000 visitors.

Recreational Development – Another important investment for many NHAs is recreational assets such as long distance trails and water based recreation. For example, the towpaths of the Ohio and Erie Canalway National Canalway (87 miles) and the Delaware and Lehigh Canal (160 miles) have been reclaimed as major hiking and biking destinations. The Hudson River Valley NHA added over 200 miles of trails with the assistance of 95,000 volunteer hours.

Marketing and Promotion – Those areas where community and economic development is part of the mission have made promotional efforts a priority. Working in close partnership with tourism providers, the South Carolina NHA has developed four regional visitor centers and promoted NHA assets like the Agriculture Tourism Trail.

Community and Economic Development – Although a smaller part of expenditures, these efforts were judged very important to residents in certain NHAs. For example, experiences offered by the Augusta Canal National Heritage Area enhance the region’s “eco-tourism” strategies. However, a more direct impact was the acquisition and reuse of the King Mill that preserved jobs for almost 300 mill hands. Over ten years the National Coal Heritage Area in West Virginia has helped meet community goals for beautification, preservation, and quality of life by providing the help of 257 members of VISTA.

Other Programmatic Goals – While conservation and education were important to all areas, every NHA tailored their work to meet the needs identified in their individual plans. Cane River NHA placed a priority on cultural conservation and tracked efforts to tell the stories of diverse groups – African American, Creole and Native American. Blackstone River Valley and Ohio and Erie Canalway focused on assisting local community plans for the future.

“...National Heritage Areas are places where natural, cultural, historic, and scenic resources combine to form a cohesive nationally important landscape arising from patterns of human activity shaped by geography.”

Evaluation - Conclusions

Twelve NHAs have been evaluated since 2005. While the information from these studies is not completely comparable, all the evaluations track accomplishments, governance, financial investments and sustainability. The eight most recent evaluations by the external evaluator Westat combine both qualitative and quantitative data. Each conclusion or finding was cross-walked with more than one source of information. Taken together, these evaluations document impressive accomplishments in a limited time frame and over very large geographic areas.

NHAs have adhered to their statutory mission, carried out the goals and objectives in their approved management plans, created new organizations for effective governance and responsibly used appropriated funding. They have contributed to the sense of place and the economic well-being of local communities. Most importantly the NHAs have enriched our shared heritage by interpreting nationally significant stories, preserving historic landmarks in a cost effective manner and offering recreational opportunities for people today and into the future.

The evaluations identified the importance of the National Heritage Area designation as a source of community pride and as “good house-keeping seal of approval.” The NHAs were commended for their partnership approach. However, it is a very present reality that without sustained federal financial support and assistance this good work will not continue. NPS funding was seen as essential seed money to make projects and programs happen. The more recent evaluations starkly document the significant drop in state funding commitments starting with the recession in 2008. These reports found that replacement of federal funds with private sector dollars or other government funds is not a likely outcome. The 12 NHAs will either go out of business or their work will grind to a slow halt.

Recommendations

All of the evaluations made recommendations to improve the management of the NHAs. The most consistent recommendations were as follows:

- Increase **quality and quantity of data collection** on the outcomes of NHA programs. The reports recommended going beyond just counting students in programs to determining educational outcomes, beyond recording volunteer hours to assessing levels of stewardship.
- Enhance the **fundraising skills and awareness** of NHA boards and commissions. This has not always been seen as a priority or as part of their position description.
- Foster a closer **working relationship with the NPS** both with adjacent units and the assigned NPS regional offices. Overall the evaluations portray a lessening of engagement between the NHA and NPS partners. One interesting suggestion was to pair NHAs with sites interpreting similar subject matter even if they are not geographically adjacent.
- Address **succession planning** in the leadership of NHA management organizations. The strength of current NHAs in this area can also be a future weakness if the areas do not develop leaders.