

Heritage Areas: Connecting People to their Place and History

Jayne Daly

We all need such places ... just to know who we are.... These are the places where we have created our stories, where we find our shared memories ... the places where we have experienced community and where we can learn to create it again.... Past, present and future are not separate. But we who are in the present are now accountable for the story. [1]

Introduction

On March 3, 2003, First Lady Laura Bush announced a new White House initiative, Preserve America, which will provide funding to “protect and restore our nation’s cultural and natural resources – from monuments and buildings to landscapes and main streets.... Preserve America will provide more opportunities for preservation and increase tourism and economic development.” [2] This initiative is the most recent manifestation of the tremendous interest by the federal and state governments and local citizens in preserving America’s cultural heritage and special places.

During the last several decades, a variety of programs have been tackling these issues, many of which, like Preserve America, highlight and support one or a few aspects of community regeneration such as main street revitalization, historic preservation, natural resource protection or economic development, often one community at a time. However, as economies, natural resources and cultural systems are regional in nature, these programs have made improvements at the local level, but need a larger framework within which to fit, in order to maximize their benefit. Heritage areas can provide that framework where communities can work together to develop a comprehensive approach to solve issues that extend beyond jurisdictional boundaries.

Early leaders in the heritage area movement included the states of Massachusetts, New York and Pennsylvania, which established “heritage parks” programs as a way of building community pride and encouraging economic revitalization, often in older urban areas. The federal government, through Congress and the National Park Service became increasingly involved during the mid-1980s with the establishment of “heritage corridors” in Illinois (Illinois & Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor), and Massachusetts and Rhode Island (Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor). The first federal designation given to an area that was non-linear (not along a canal or valley) was in Southwest Pennsylvania, where a nine county area, America’s Industrial Heritage Project (now called Paths of Progress), was designated to interpret and preserve the region’s steel, coal and rail heritage to support and encourage recreation, economic development and tourism. [3]

Over the last twenty years, a variety of terms have been used interchangeably to describe both the rich intersection of people and place as well as the efforts to integrate economic development with cultural and natural resource protection including: living landscapes, partnership parks, cultural landscapes, urban cultural parks, scenic by-ways, heritage by-ways, American heritage landscapes, historic corridors, and heritage transportation corridors, to name a few. The phrase “heritage area” seems to be the current terminology which incorporates all of these various concepts, to a degree.

While the language can be confusing, the basic principle is not. Heritage areas are dynamic regional initiatives that build connections between people, their place, and their history. These connections are strengthened by capturing and telling the stories of the people and their place. These stories, when linked together, reflect a regional identity and support a collective awareness of the need to protect and enhance what makes our places unique. They give rise to opportunities for economic development that promote and preserve the region’s assets.

Heritage areas share the following fundamental principles and practices:

- A regional focus and geographic boundary;
- Partnerships between the public, private and non profit sectors are essential in their formation and implementation;
- Local residents play an important role in designing and clarifying the goals and strategies for the region;
- A plan is developed that lays out the vision, identifies the goals and objectives of the region, outlines an implementation strategy and allocates responsibilities to various partners.
- The region’s cultural and natural history are captured and communicated in ways that clearly articulate the importance of the place.
- Implementation activities often include establishing regional linkages such as trails or corridors; critical building renovation and restoration; and development and coordinated interpretation of the region’s stories.
- A management entity, which can be a corporation, non-profit, commission or authority, takes responsibility for guiding the planning and implementation of the heritage area.
- The management entity has no land use authority and most cannot buy or own land within the heritage area.

Designation of Heritage Areas

National Heritage Areas: There are currently twenty three National Heritage Areas, which are defined as places

... where natural, cultural, historic and scenic resources combine to form a cohesive, nationally distinctive landscape arising from patterns of human activity shaped by geography. These patterns make National Heritage areas representative of the national experience through the physical features that remain and the traditions that have evolved in them. [4]

National designation brings with it a variety of benefits including technical and financial support, which is provided through the National Park Service's "Heritage Partnership Programs".

National designation often follows and rewards the work of citizens, local businesses and organizations that have dedicated their time and effort to develop an initial vision for what the region can be. The initiative may come from existing economic development or tourism organizations, state government, citizens or non-profits. Alternatively, Congress can commission a special study of a region through the National Park Service. Proposals for designation are considered and approved by the US Congress, with advice from the Department of the Interior.

Once the area is designated, a management plan must be developed and submitted to the Department of the Interior for approval. Components of the management plans vary according to the area's legislation but may include an inventory of natural and cultural sites; policies for resource management; an implementation program including strategies for protecting and interpreting important cultural and natural resources and improving physical sites; a financial plan that sets out funding needs for implementation; and partners' roles and responsibilities.

Funding is provided through annual Congressional appropriation. Amounts for 2003 range from a minimum of \$50,000 for the Cache Le Poudre River Corridor in Colorado to \$1,000,000 for heritage areas such as the Ohio and Erie Canal (Ohio and New York); Rivers of Steel (Pennsylvania); Essex National Heritage Area (Massachusetts) and South Carolina National Heritage Corridor.[5]

State Designation: A few states including Pennsylvania, Maryland and South Carolina have developed programs that are as rigorous in regional resource identification and planning as the federal system. Pennsylvania's Heritage Parks Program, which pre-dates federal designation, is administered by the state's Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR). Of the eleven state Heritage Parks, five are also National Heritage Areas. DCNR supports the heritage parks by providing technical and financial assistance to designated areas, which are defined as

... large geographic regions or corridors ... that span two or more counties. These areas contain a multitude of cultural, historic, recreational, natural and scenic resources of state and national significance that collectively exemplify the industrial heritage of Pennsylvania. Through regional partnerships and public grassroots planning strategies, these resources are identified, protected, enhanced and promoted to strengthen regional economies through increased tourism, creation of new jobs and stimulations of public and private partnerships for new investment opportunities. [6]

In order to be considered for designation, a region must demonstrate that there is local commitment and support to develop and maintain a heritage park as well as complete a feasibility study. Once the feasibility study is approved, the region is designated a planning area and a management action plan is developed which sets out a 10 year plan to organize, implement, manage and market the heritage park. Funding is available to support park management, projects and special studies.

Local Initiatives: There are a number of very good examples of locally initiated projects that seek to connect heritage sites on a regional level to tell an authentic story of the local culture. The Tahoe-Comstock Heritage Area was established in 1993 and tells the story of the impacts of the gold and silver rush on small communities in Nevada and California during the mid 1850s. The story emphasizes the effects of the mining on natural resources, as significant amounts of wood and water were required to keep the mines running. The heritage area was initiated and is run by a non-profit corporation, the Heritage Areas Association, to promote the awareness of history and historic sites in the Tahoe-Comstock region and to promote heritage tourism. [7]

Tracks Across Wyoming follows the original transcontinental railroad for 400 miles across Southern Wyoming. The effort is managed by a partnership of organizations in southern Wyoming that are working with local communities and citizens to promote the region as a unique and quality tourist destination. Their vision is to “preserve, interpret and celebrate Wyoming’s historic resources, natural beauty, quality of life and spirit.” [8]

A much more ambitious effort is unfolding on the Niagara Corridor, which borders New York and Ontario, Canada. This bi-national regional initiative is the result of a series of meetings between local, state, federal and provincial leaders designed to bring attention to heritage opportunities in the region. The organizers are working in collaboration with numerous partners on both sides of the border to tell the region’s stories through interpretation and preservation; implement strategic projects and market the region as a whole. [9]

A Word of Caution

It is important to differentiate between heritage areas that promote an integrated regional approach to resource protection and economic development and those that have begun to use the heritage area label simply to attract tourists. According to a National Trust for Historic Preservation survey released in 2000, more than 50% of U.S. states have established statewide heritage or cultural tourism programs since 1990. Twenty of those programs had been established since 1995. [10] The reason for the tremendous interest in heritage tourism is the economic opportunity that it provides. Studies have documented that visiting historic and cultural sites is the second most popular activity for domestic travelers (behind shopping) and accounts for 15% of the tourism industry. People interested in historic and cultural activities also “spend more, do more and stay longer than other types of U.S. travelers.”[11] The potential for capturing some of this financial

windfall has even motivated theme parks and casinos to build “heritage sites” to attract tourists.

However, there is tremendous risk in designing a heritage tourism program without the careful analysis and planning that goes into developing a heritage area. First, the desire to “jump on the bandwagon” often leads to inauthentic historic accounts or the “commodification” of heritage – the reduction of heritage to the lowest common denominator to attract the largest paying crowd. [12] Attracting tourists without first providing the appropriate infrastructure to accommodate their needs often leads to community outrage over crowded streets, lack of parking, etc., and can prove detrimental to the economic development efforts of the area when tourists are disappointed that the attractions are not well designed, coordinated and staffed. Finally, selling heritage tourism without adequate protection measures in place can destroy the very resources that attract visitors to the area. In the end, these shortsighted efforts to capture tourism dollars will only last as long as the economy is strong and interest in visiting cultural and historic sites remains robust. The most successful heritage areas, on the other hand, are much more than tourist destinations. They are the expression of the people who live, work and shape the land. Their stories are rich and diverse. They provide a bridge connecting the past to the present and the people to their place.

International Approaches to Heritage Principles

US heritage areas are relatively new compared to their international counterparts and while there are good examples of comprehensive heritage programs in England, Italy and Germany, France’s regional park system, in a particular, is worth examining more closely. During the 1960s, the French government began to develop policies that would integrate social, economic and environmental goals at a regional level. The French Regional Nature Parks, which were created as a part of this new approach, are similar to heritage areas in the United States in that they encompass entire landscapes, where millions of people live, work and recreate. Like heritage areas, regional parks in France are created through a locally based coalition which undertakes a planning process that extends over several years and includes a “landscape diagnosis” – a study of the natural and human factors that have shaped the landscape as well as an analysis of the region’s cultural, social and economic situation. This study serves as the basis for the park’s Charter, which, like a management plan, identifies the park’s boundary, objectives, management strategy and budget. Each of the parks focuses its efforts on preserving and enhancing those qualities that makes it culturally distinct.

There are several important differences between the French and American system that are evidence of the maturity of the French system. First, in France, the Charter, is a binding 10 year agreement and all local and regional officials who sign the Charter commit to exercise their authority – including their land use authority – in support of the Charter. Secondly, while each park operates independently, they are seen as part of a larger system of parks that make up the French Regional Nature Parks. Finally, there is an umbrella organization, the Federation of French Regional Nature Parks, which provides

various types of support including product promotion through coordinated local and regional branding, staff development and marketing. [13]

Challenges

As the heritage area movement begins to mature in the United States there are several challenges that must be addressed.

- **Leadership and Organizational Evolution:** some of the management entities, particularly those with a commission or authority structure, struggle with issues of organizational evolution and find it difficult to attract new and visionary leaders to their boards. As many of the commission and authority members are appointed a Governor, these management entities often do not function like a Board of Directors, but rather as a political oversight committee. This may hamper the ability of the organization to raise money and adapt to changing needs within the region.
- **Communications:** Many of the rural heritage areas have difficulty expressing what their heritage area is and what it will accomplish. Further complications may arise when property rights proponents oppose the heritage area, concerned that it will impact their rights as land owners. Some of this difficulty arises from the lack of a widely accepted, clear and precise definition of what a heritage area is and does. There is interest in Congress to further refine the federal definition and provide clearer guidelines to the National Park Service regarding feasibility studies. The challenge is to accomplish this goal – to provide clarity - while remaining flexible enough so that the concept of heritage areas can continue to encompass a wide variety of initiatives.
- **Raising the Profile and Funding for Heritage Areas:** since the movement is still relatively young, heritage areas are often viewed as a passing trend and not a serious approach to resource preservation or economic development. Economic development professionals think that the concept is “too fluffy” and conservationists feel that protection measures are not strong enough. As a result, heritage areas often do not get the recognition or financial support that they deserve. There is a need to evaluate the existing programs in a comprehensive manner so that the case can be made to federal, state and private funders that heritage areas are providing economic opportunities, improving quality of life and preserving resources.
- **Meaningful Citizen Involvement:** if heritage areas are about people, stories and place, then residents must be meaningfully involved in the development, implementation and evolution of the area. Some regions are simply too large for this type of meaningful involvement. Others are not interested in involving citizens in what is considered a technically challenging planning process. Still others do not have the capacity and skill to deal with the competing interests and criticism that residents often

provide. As a result, citizens are less engaged in the process and accordingly, less committed to implementation.

- National Coordination: finally, there is much to be gained through better coordination among the existing heritage areas, with opportunities for sharing experiences, training, joint promotion and product recognition. Fortunately, the Alliance for Heritage Areas is beginning to undertake this very important role, but at this point the organization does not have the professional staff to meet the ever growing demands of the field.

Conclusion

Heritage areas are an important opportunity to reinvigorate community in America. Recent studies have shown that Americans long to reconnect to their neighbors and their communities, but there are few mechanisms and places for that to happen. Heritage areas, done right, can provide that connection – among people, their place and history.

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Notes:

[1] Robert Archibald, *A Place to Remember*, Alta Mira Press, CA, 1999, pp. 220-221.

[2] Remarks by Mrs. Bush for the National Association of Counties, March 3, 2003, www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases.

[3] J. Glenn Eugster, Deirdre Gibson, *Heritage Areas: An Approach to Integral Landscape Conservation*, 1990.

[4] This definition was provided to Congress by the National Park Service during testimony at a House hearing held on October 26, 1999. See www.cr.nps.gov for a complete list of the National Heritage Areas.

[5] Brenda Barrett, *Heritage Area Bulletin Board*, February 2003.

[6] *Pennsylvania Heritage Parks Program Manual*.

[7] Tahoe Comstock Heritage Area, www.innercite.com/heritage.

[8] Tracks Across Wyoming, Trails to Tracks to Highways,
www.tracksacrosswyoming.com.

[9] Rethinking Niagara, Heritage Tourism on the Bi-National Regional Agenda, October 23 and 24, 2001, www.urbandesignproject.org.

[10] New National Trust Survey Indicates Explosive Growth of State Level Programs, December 19, 2000, www.nthp.org/news.

[11] Cheryl M. Hargrove, "Heritage Tourism", Cultural Resources Magazine, No 1 - 2002.

[12] George Everett, "Heritage Tourism: Selling or Celebrating Our Soul?", 2001, www.butteamerica.com.

[13] Judith M. LaBelle, "French Lessons", Gleanings, Glynwood Center, Autumn, 2002.