

Heritage Areas title image with National Park Service arrowhead

What is a National Heritage Area?

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A "national heritage area" is a place designated by the United States Congress where natural, cultural, historic and recreational resources combine to form a cohesive, nationally-distinctive landscape arising from patterns of human activity shaped by geography. These areas tell nationally important stories about our nation and are representative of the national experience through both the physical features that remain and the traditions that have evolved within in them.

Photo of Slater's Mill which is an old building with a dome topped tower along a New England flowing river

How is it different from a national park?

A National Heritage Area is not a unit of the National Park Service, nor is any land owned or managed by the National Park Service. Instead, a National Heritage Area is a locally-managed designation that focuses heritage-centered interpretation, conservation and development projects over a complex matrix of public and private land. National Heritage Area initiatives are coordinated by a local entity in partnership with varied stakeholders that work collaboratively on projects that meet the area's stated management plan goals. In addition, while a National Heritage Area designation is permanent, the NPS relationship with and commitments to a NHA vary over time.

How do communities benefit from the National Heritage Area designation?

The designation has both tangible and intangible benefits. Heritage conservation efforts are grounded in a community's pride in its history and traditions, and in residents' interest and involvement in retaining and interpreting the landscape for future generations. Preserving the integrity of the cultural landscape and local stories means that future generations will be able to understand their relationship to the land. Heritage areas provide educational and inspirational opportunities which encourage residents and visitors to stay in a place, but they also offer a collaborative approach to conservation that does not compromise traditional local control over and use of the landscape.

In addition to enhancing local pride and retaining residents, designation comes with limited technical and financial assistance from the National Park Service. NPS primarily provides planning and interpretation assistance and expertise, but also connects regions with other Federal agencies. Federal financial assistance provides valuable "seed" money that covers basic expenses such as staffing, and leverages other money from state, local and private sources. The region also benefits from national recognition due to its association with the National Park Service through the use of the NPS arrowhead symbol as a branding strategy.

Why utilize the heritage areas strategy?

Nature, ecology, and topography shape the culture of a community, which in turn determines how land will be used and consequently what values it will provide to society. This human imprint on the land creates what is called a "cultural landscape," a setting comprised of natural, cultural, social, and economic components that reflect a complex and

continuous interrelationship between people and the land.

Many of our nation's unique cultural landscapes now face irrevocable alteration through development or neglect. The heritage area concept offers an innovative method for citizens, in partnership with local, state, and Federal government, and nonprofit and private sector interests, to shape the long-term future of their environment. Heritage areas work across jurisdictional and demographic boundaries by identifying multiple cultural landscapes that are linked thematically, historically, or geographically. Constituents utilize shared concerns about these landscapes to collaboratively shape a plan and implementation strategy that focuses on maintaining the distinct qualities that integrate the region and make it special.

Becoming a heritage area does not require prior state or Federal designation or approval. Five states (Louisiana, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Utah, and New York) currently have heritage area programs, and there are hundreds of locally defined grassroots heritage area initiatives. Federal designation depends upon Congressional support, whether the region's resources are nationally important and the degree to which the public is engaged in and supportive of designation.

What are the benefits of a partnership approach to heritage development?

The partnership approach creates the opportunity for a diverse range of constituents to come together to voice the range of visions and perspectives that exist in any community that has strong connections and interests in the place in which it lives and works. Resident participation in the collaborative exercise of idea sharing and planning encourages the dialog that needs to occur to reveal the goals and visions that members of a community have in common. Basing regional planning upon the shared goals of its constituent communities, and pursuing and encouraging cooperation regardless of other perceived differences can unite the energies and resources of multiple voices in a common goal to preserve and enhance the qualities of the place in which they live. Partnering also encourages the leveraging of financial and in-kind resources and reduces the possibility of duplicating efforts and wasting scarce resources.

How are National Heritage Areas managed?

The management entity, outlined in designation legislation, may be a State or local agency, a Federal commission, or a private nonprofit corporation. The management entity is empowered to create a management plan for the heritage area, and is authorized to receive Federal funds on the area's behalf. The authority to implement the management plan is local--it rests in the hands of willing local officials and the actions of local organizations and individuals. Designation legislation does not provide the management entity or any Federal agency with the authority to regulate land. The management entity is also prohibited from using the Federal funds it receives through enabling legislation to acquire real property.

The management plan, required in the designation legislation, describes the ways the management entity and its partners can work together toward the fulfillment of their common vision. Short and long-term actions listed in a management plan might include developing and implementing an interpretation plan, assisting in the rehabilitation of a number of historic sites, working with partners to open regional visitors' centers, or creating a network of recreational trails. The management entity and its partners have three years following designation during which to develop a plan and receive approval by the Secretary of the Interior.

What is the role of the National Park Service?

After a heritage area is designated by Congress, National Park Service staff are enlisted as partners with local community activists in planning and implementing heritage area activities. NPS enters into a cooperative agreement with the local parties. The compact is a statement of assent to mutually shared goals, and also serves as the legal vehicle through which Federal funds can be passed to non-governmental management entities. National Park Service involvement is always advisory in nature; it neither makes nor carries out management decisions.

Why is the National Park Service involved?

Since 1916, the National Park Service has been the Federal agency responsible for preserving nationally significant natural and historic resources for present and future generations. Heritage Areas allow the Park Service to fulfill this mission without having to acquire or manage more land. Instead, NPS assists citizens who express the initiative to protect their nationally important resources. Fostering local stewardship of distinct and largely intact historic and cultural landscapes allows the National Park Service to work more directly with the public in the direct preservation and protection of important landscapes which have helped define a distinctly American identity.

What kinds of activities does a National Heritage Area offer to outside visitors?

Geography, history, resources and maturity all shape what a National Heritage Area can offer visitors. Most National Heritage Areas offer a range of activities for all ages and interests, from recreation (biking, boating) and cultural events (food festivals, art circuits) to history and culture activities (walking tours, museums and historic buildings). Because heritage areas link resources and stories, they provide unique opportunities to understand the larger context of the region's stories, landscapes and people. Many areas provide volunteering, group tour or multiple-day excursions. Others provide combined events that highlight unusual combinations of the region's natural, historical and cultural assets, combining bike tours with Bed and Breakfast stays, for example. You can also combine your trip to a National Heritage

Areas with a nearby National Park Service site or trail.

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