

THE CURRENT STATE OF HERITAGE AREAS RESEARCH: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract

Twenty years have passed since the first national heritage area, the Illinois & Michigan National Heritage Corridor, was designated in 1984. As interest in using national heritage areas to promote resource conservation and preserve community vitality increases, pressures to understand how heritage development works (and does not work) are also increasing. Heritage area practitioners and researchers are coming together to discuss and define a heritage areas research agenda, to include identifying questions and gaps in the body of existing research. Challenges inherent to the interdisciplinary nature of heritage development remain in the way of defining an agenda, as do the contrasting needs of individual areas with their policy-making counterparts. As the body of research and research tools grows, so will new opportunities for research, and so the agenda continues to evolve with each new interdisciplinary discussion.

1.0 Heritage Area Designation and Development: Past and Present

The first national heritage area, the Illinois & Michigan National Heritage Corridor, was designated by Congress over 20 years ago. The designation recognized a collection of nationally significant cultural and historic resources and created a regional management structure to facilitate stakeholder collaboration on shared preservation projects. Federal involvement was limited to technical and financial assistance, and the land stayed in state and private ownership. The designation called for the use of a collection of conservation, interpretation, recreation, and preservation tools, and project planning and implementation was left in the hands of local

stakeholders. The legislation provided temporary National Park Service involvement under the assumption that local capacity to sustain projects could be achieved in a decade or less.

The national heritage area concept was soon adopted elsewhere by the National Park Service—in the Blackstone River Valley in 1986 and the Delaware & Lehigh Valleys in 1988. Since the 1980s, 27 areas have received national designation and been given technical and financial assistance to conserve resources and stories that have been deemed nationally significant. The scale and thematic scope of the areas differs dramatically, as do the ways that partners prioritize and implement activities. Still, common themes are that much of the work is entrepreneurial in nature, multidisciplinary, and requires significant volunteer involvement and local leadership.

The differences in resources and management strategies among the 27 national heritage areas impose challenges to identifying, measuring and evaluating heritage area impacts. In the absence of National Park Service program legislation and with little in the way of research or evaluation to rely on, there is little information to guide the development of policies and guidelines that ensure quality, consistency and accountability while allowing for entrepreneurship, flexibility and creativity. Heritage areas, which are increasingly run by nonprofit organizations instead of Federal Commissions, informally share ideas with each other about management and innovative project partnering, which includes aligning their interests with private businesses, educational institutions and tourism professionals. While heritage development is rooted in past stories, resources and traditions, the missions and goals of heritage areas are heavily focused on the livability of communities, and rely on the participation and engagement of local residents, organizations and leaders to help them achieve their goals. The long view and inclusive approach require participants to trust in the process, be flexible in their participation and accept that tangible results take time.

2.0 Current Policy and Management Pressures

Since NPS funding typically ceases 5 to 15 years after designation, the heritage areas are consistently running up against time. They are periodically asked by potential funding partners and the National Park Service to provide rationales for continued assistance and involvement. However, in the 20 years since the Illinois and Michigan was designated, the consensus among practitioners and academics is that heritage areas took more than two decades to become self-sufficient. The National Park Service Advisory Board Partnerships Committee, which advises the Secretary and the Director on issues related to National Park Service policy, has been charged with defining the future role of the National Park Service in the national heritage areas and in particular the role of the NPS in heritage areas over time. Among recommendations that suggest practical ways to shape and strengthen heritage area policy, the Advisory Board recommends supporting research and analysis to provide the information necessary to evaluate progress over time. Regardless of the realistic time frame for heritage area fruition, heritage areas need to provide proof their effectiveness. Research can also help define the appropriate roles of major partners in collaborative conservation and partnership networks, help identify outcomes of designation and partnership on resource conservation and community and economic development over time, and define quality standards for heritage development.¹ In the current policy environment, qualitative and quantitative research, whether focused broadly on heritage areas or specifically on individual scenarios, has the power to inform effective policy development and management standards.

Pressures to measure the impacts of heritage development are also coming from Congress, where at least 20 designation bills have been introduced as of May 2005.² The popularity of heritage areas has influenced

policy makers and critics to ask whether heritage area designation is an effective National Park Service (NPS) investment. In 2003, Senator Craig Thomas (R., WY) asked the Government Accountability Office to investigate the impacts of NPS funding in national heritage areas. Their report calls for greater accountability and a more systematic process for establishing national heritage areas.³ Senator Thomas has also asked the National Park Service to write a national heritage areas program bill. The National Heritage Partnership Act has been introduced in the 109th (S. 943) alongside a companion bill in the House.⁴

Heritage area managers and partners and the academic community must come together to identify what kinds of research are most urgently needed and to participate in developing and applying evaluation methodologies to measure the efficiency, effectiveness, impacts and outcomes of heritage area development and practice. Additionally, at the local level, heritage areas have their own set of research needs.

As the body of research grows, new research reveals new sets of questions. The evolving nature of the heritage research agenda makes the ongoing dialog between practitioners and academics on the current research environment an effective way to help practitioners and academics focus their questions, identify common priorities, discuss what is doable, and agree on current research priorities. The agenda being developed provides opportunities to build upon existing thinking as it creates a baseline upon which to build subsequent research and conclusions about how heritage areas get work done.

¹National Park System Advisory Board Partnerships Committee Report to the Board, "Findings and Recommendations on the Future of the National Heritage areas in the National Park System." April 16, 2005.

²Available from <http://www.cr.nps.gov/heritageareas/LEG/introbills109.pdf> (accessed May 30, 2005).

³"A More Systematic Approach for Establishing National Heritage Areas and Actions to Improve their Accountability are Needed." Testimony provided before the Senate Committee on Natural Resources by Barry Hill, March 30, 2005.

⁴In 1994, Representative Hefley introduced the first bill to establish a national heritage areas program, the American Heritage Partnerships Act. Hefley has reintroduced his bill in subsequent years as well. A current list of pending legislation is maintained by the NPS National Heritage Areas Washington office at <http://www.cr.nps.gov/heritageareas/LEG/index.htm> (accessed May 30, 2005).

Appalachian Forest Heritage Area

The Appalachian Forest Heritage Area has its roots in the long history of human use of the highland forests of West Virginia and western Maryland. For centuries, the forests of the Appalachian Mountains have sustained local settlers, provided raw materials for America's economic expansion, and inspired visitors. AFHA tells the story of this forest legacy and the mountain people who forged it. Forest heritage has been defined as "the ongoing story of how the forest shapes history and culture, and how ecology and human use have shaped the forest."

The Appalachian Forest Heritage Area (AFHA) initiative is now in the final year of the four year USDA Fund for Rural America grant. Although budgetary control during the initial grant period resides with the Extension Service and the Division of Forestry at West Virginia University, the implementation process and long-term management of the heritage area is taking the form of a community-based, collaborative decision process.

Policy and management pressures have existed throughout the process. Bringing together a diverse set of stakeholders has led to a variety of differences of opinions, such as appropriate terminology, logo selection, and the AFHA role in endorsing other projects. A second challenge for the heritage area has been accommodating property rights concerns of project stakeholders and county landowners. In West Virginia, approximately 83 percent of the land area is privately owned, 7 percent industry owned, and 10 percent are publicly owned lands. Within the boundaries of the AFHA, the percentage of public land is higher due to the proximity of the Monongahela National Forest. Policy and management constraints have complemented The Appalachian Forest Heritage Area's growth process and represents the dynamic relationships between stakeholders.

Initially conceived in the crucible of a university setting, AFHA is in a unique position to serve as a model or demonstration project for future heritage areas. Heritage areas such as the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area, are gaining momentum because people seek solace and meaning in their local and regional landscapes and special places when there is so much uncertainty in global economic and political affairs. Research opportunities lie in continuously monitoring lessons learned, economic and social benefits derived, and implementation constraints and reporting findings to the larger academic, heritage, tourism, and extension communities.

-- Dr. Dave McGill, Dr. Steve Selin, and Susan Martin-Williams, West Virginia University Division of Forestry

3.0 Call for interdisciplinary sharing of research and approaches

The National Park Service National Heritage Areas Washington office has coordinated three workshops to bring practitioners and academics together to assess current heritage area research, identify research needs and refine a research agenda. The most recent workshop, *National Heritage Areas II: Fostering a Research Agenda*, was held during the 2005 George Wright Society (GWS) *Biennial Conference on Parks, Protected Areas, and Cultural Sites* in Philadelphia. In contrast with the first two workshops, which involved participants from federal agencies and organizations to discuss ways to collectively advocate for and facilitate research, this workshop involved researchers and practitioners who are themselves thinking critically about research needs. The workshop discussion was loosely based on work by four advanced degree-seeking students engaged in qualitative research on social meaning, policy, indicators, and management models in individual emerging and designated national heritage areas.⁵

Research on landscape-scale conservation of the type occurring in national heritage areas in the United States has grown in quantity and complexity since Adrian Phillips, Vice Chair for World Heritage of the World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) of International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), presented his diagram on the cyclical nature of research as it informs practice at the first research workshop. Phillips proposed a way to organize the demands on the research agenda by categorizing priorities into four interrelated components:

- Developing existing capacity
- Improving knowledge and understanding

⁵Abstracts of the session entitled National Heritage Areas I: Current Research on Social Meaning, Policy Evaluation, Qualitative Indicators, and Management Models available at <http://www.georgewright.org/>; papers to be published as conference proceedings in late 2005. Proceedings of the National Heritage Areas research meetings are available at <http://www.cr.nps.gov/heritageareas/REP/research.htm> (accessed May 30, 2005).

- Monitoring and evaluation
- Promoting the concept.⁶

As the base of knowledge and understanding grows, some researchers are beginning to measure the qualitative aspects of heritage area development and maturity by looking at what happens between partners doing heritage development work. Qualities of heritage area development include willingness and readiness to become a self-identified heritage area, sophistication, changing quality of life, and the commodification of heritage. But practitioners and researchers are interested in probing other questions as well. Some of those highlighted during the most recent research discussion include:

- Do heritage areas effectively address diversity, civic engagement, and inclusiveness?
- What makes heritage real for people? What brings people together?
- When is the most appropriate time to designate an area?
- Does National Park Service (NPS) involvement add value e.g. increase other organization involvement?
- How do we make the heritage area strategy more mainstream to the NPS?
- Is environmental and ecosystem recreation a “gateway” into heritage?
- Is heritage an effective bio-social system development and management tool?
- What is the role of place-based education?
- How much time is enough to affect change?⁷

⁶Diagram available at <http://www.cr.nps.gov/heritageareas/REP/research.htm> (accessed May 30, 2005)

⁷Proceedings from Fostering a Research Agenda meeting at the 2005 George Wright Society Symposium, 2005. Proceedings available from www.cr.nps.gov/heritageareas/research.htm (accessed June 1, 2005).



The questions, proposed by participants with differing research priorities, probe a variety of issues and therefore make prioritizing research needs difficult. Researchers realize that methodologies and established research practices in other disciplines, such as business, education, and health, can provide a relevant context for evaluating issues including sustainability, quality of life, leadership, social justice, Federal roles and responsibilities, and “success,” and the crossover may provide the context needed to clarify, organize and prioritize research on heritage development.

4.0 Obstacles to Identifying and Prioritizing Measurement and Evaluation Needs

In spite of the productive dialog taking place to clarify the current research agenda, the interdisciplinary nature of heritage development complicates the identification of appropriate evaluation methods. The interdisciplinary backgrounds of researchers similarly create obstacles to communicating research methodologies and approaches. The needs of researchers also differ from the needs of practitioners, policymakers, and the National Park Service. Researchers need ways of better consolidating and sharing their information in ways that are accessible and useful to practitioners and one another. Additionally, heritage development impact is inherently challenging to measure in isolation of other factors including changes

in the economy, demographics, and land use. Economic impact analyses are also limiting in their ability to measure the impacts of heritage areas on quality of life and perceptions about change. Participants in workshop discussions agree that a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods may be the most effective way to measure “success” (which itself needs to be further defined) and the importance of strong leadership, positive communication, time, and flexible and open-minded partners. Two components of the proposed organizational diagram, Measuring and Evaluation and Improving Knowledge and Understanding, share a symbiotic relationship, each informing and being refined by the other. The heritage areas field is old enough to have established subject matter for study but young enough that the information has not been gathered and organized in any formal way. Information gathering includes the collection and organization of physical documents and examples but also using survey instruments to record changing perceptions about community vitality. Indicators and analysis of the evidence could take various forms, including:

Indicators:

- Quantitative indicators of “process”
- Quantitative impacts
- Non-economic qualitative impacts
- “Brain drain” and “youth drain” before and following designation
- Social capital indicators – e.g. readership of newspapers, civic participation, longitudinal baseline data collection
- Measurement tools to quantify/qualify the level of success/ satisfaction perceived by residents and stakeholders
- Money being kept in the economy–(e.g. through local business development, local foods and products)

Comparative Analysis:

- Compare NPS and non-NPS models, best practices and successes
- Compare managing entities in bureaucracies and non-government organizations, local governments and characterize what works

- Compare international management models such as greenways in central Europe
- Document and compare cultural differences/ perceptions--urban/rural, generational, ethnic--within and outside heritage areas

Evaluation criteria:

- Develop and test evaluation criteria and models or frameworks.

5.0 Opportunities to Build upon Existing Efforts

Periodic research agenda workshops are meant to ensure that practitioners and academics share knowledge and insights and develop joint strategies for advancing the agenda and building the network. The discussions also provide an opportunity for participants to share opportunities and resources currently in use. Building upon existing efforts is one way to build the research base and identify where the agenda needs to go next. Building on existing resources may include:

- A synthetic, interdisciplinary bibliography drawing across disciplines and fields
- Leadership forum on developing capacity
- Study tours and exchanges
- Align research interests with existing practitioner organizations such as the Alliance of National Heritage Areas
- Utilize existing projects such as the National Trust Rural Development Initiative to test proposed criteria
- Build upon and refine existing institutional evaluation methods and models
- Compile an atlas of current practices and methods used within and across heritage regions.

The Alliance of National Heritage Areas, a non-profit coalition of the 27 national heritage areas, has been developing indicators to measure impact in national heritage areas. In 2002, national heritage area directors compiled a list of over 30 indicators which could be feasibly measured. The National Park Service now partners with the heritage areas to collect annual data on a short list of almost a dozen performance

metrics that measure progression toward conservation, partnership and stewardship goals.⁸ Qualitative research conducted concurrently will help the areas to refine their indicators and their counting mechanisms to include those that most accurately reflect the impacts of national heritage area activities. The Alliance also helps individual areas conduct periodic Money Generation Impact studies. More than a dozen areas have or are currently conducting onsite visitor surveys to measure visitor demographics and trip characteristics. Michigan State University compiles summary conclusions on the economic impacts of visitation to national heritage areas.⁹ The limitations of economic impact studies as compared with other more complex methods of evaluation are much debated, as there seems to be value placed on reporting high numbers of economic impact regardless of what the numbers imply for long-term resource conservation and community vitality.

Existing information is being disseminated since the most recent research workshop. An online bibliography of heritage development materials and publications is in development. This bibliography reflects the growing number of articles and publications specific to heritage area development and evaluation and is the first attempt to collect heritage development-related research and evaluation in a central location.¹⁰ Research presentations are also generating excitement among new audiences to conduct heritage areas-related research. Research presentations, such as one at the 2005 Cultural and Heritage Tourism Alliance Conference in Chicago on economic impact evaluation tools that measure the impacts of cultural and heritage infrastructure, are providing practitioners with tool to develop quantitative performance indicators tailored to their own needs.¹¹

⁸Visit <http://www.cr.nps.gov/heritageareas/REP/research.htm> (accessed May 30, 2005)

⁹Report available from <http://www.prr.msu.edu/mgm2/default.htm> (accessed May 30, 2005)

¹⁰Visit <http://www.heritagedevelopmentinstitute.org/research/> (accessed May 30, 2005)

¹¹"Making Research Actionable: What to Do With the Numbers." Conference program available at <http://www.chtalliance.com> (accessed May 30, 2005).

Qualitative analysis is surfacing as well. A recent panel session at the 2005 George Wright Society *Biennial Conference on Parks, Protected Areas, and Cultural Sites* by advanced-degree seeking students doing qualitative research on issues specific to individual heritage areas exposed National Park Service social scientists to new ways of evaluating changing cultural dynamics and perceptions in lived-in landscapes.

Qualitative research is also beginning to surface in the form of reports that assess the progress of national heritage areas since designation. The reports are being used by the areas to document their progress and accomplishments and to make a case for continued federal and partner involvement. In 2004, the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission initiated a sustainability study to evaluate the past 18 years of work. The evaluation assessed the Commission's accomplishments and progress toward achieving its stated goals, the National Park Service (NPS) investment and leveraging impact, further actions and commitments needed to protect, enhance, and interpret the Corridor, the Commission form of management, and possible future management options and alternatives for achieving their goals. The evaluative process is being adapted to the needs of the Delaware & Lehigh National Heritage Corridor as it assesses its own progress and future management alternatives. With subsequent assessments researchers hope to draw similarities and differences among the findings from different heritage areas and provide this analysis to policy makers and heritage area leaders to inform the development of effective national guidelines and management policies.

The National Park Service encourages practitioners and researchers to understand the value of research and to invest in research because the knowledge furthers the abilities of the National Park Service and Congress to determine their role in heritage development and understand the impacts of the Federal involvement. The research priorities of the National Heritage Areas Washington office are to foster the development of:

1. Definitions of "success" and "sustainability" in national heritage areas

Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor

In 1986 Congress established the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor to preserve and interpret the unique and significant contributions of the valley's resources and history to the nation's heritage. The Blackstone River Valley is one of the nation's richest, best-preserved repositories of landscapes, structures, and sites attesting to the rise of industry in America. The valley led in the social revolution that transformed an agricultural society into an industrial giant. These two forces, agriculture and industry, shaped the patterns of settlement, land use, and growth in the valley. Thousands of structures and entire landscapes still exist that represent the history of the American Industrial Revolution and the complex economic and social relationships of the people who lived and worked here.

Today, the most significant resource of the Blackstone Valley is its "wholeness," the unique survival of representative elements of entire eighteenth- and nineteenth-century production systems. Few places exist where such a concentration of integrated historic, cultural, and natural resources is as accessible to interpretation, preservation, and other management strategies.

Thinking of the Blackstone National Heritage Corridor as a partnership system has implications for the strategy needed to sustain and build on success within the Corridor. As the Commission deliberates on the future of the Corridor, it will need to consider how best to build upon past success to create a framework for the future that will support and sustain that success over the long term.

Research opportunities lie in monitoring the impacts of the study on decision-making and planning for the future, monitoring the change occurring as projects gain momentum in the third decade of the designation, measuring the indirect impacts of heritage area designation including economic and social benefits, and constraints of time and funding on project completion and eventual sustainability.

-- excerpted from the *Executive Summary for Reflecting on the Past, Looking to the Future* (2005)
Martin-Williams, West Virginia University Division of Forestry

2. A body of cases studies that articulates successful and sustainable management frameworks and practices, critical components of success, and benchmarks of sustainability
3. Indicators to monitor and measure heritage area maturation, success, and sustainability
4. An international network of researchers and practitioners that supports the ongoing discussion, development and dissemination of research, resources, and opportunities
5. Consistent and high-quality heritage development practice through the proliferation of training, networking, information exchange and resource sharing opportunities.

6.0 Concluding Thoughts

As the body of research grows, the research agenda for heritage areas will become more focused. Continually reviewing and assessing progress is the most effective way to stay on task and to refine the research agenda to guide researchers and practitioners in their work. Keeping the dialog alive among practitioners and academics nationwide by creating regular opportunities to promote information exchange and updates will keep the spirit and focus of heritage areas research relevant to practitioners and policymakers.

The authors welcome any suggestions and additions you might have to contribute to the ongoing development of a heritage area research agenda.

Citation:

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