

ANATOMY OF A HERITAGE AREA START-UP: THE APPALACHIAN FOREST HERITAGE AREA

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Abstract

The heritage area movement is gaining momentum in the United States, offering new opportunities for recreation and park managers to acquire financial resources and build relationships with new constituents. Despite this rapid growth, there is little systematic data on the heritage area movement to support its efficient and effective growth. This article reports on a research study examining the anatomy of a heritage area start-up, namely the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area (AFHA) in West Virginia and western Maryland. Case study research methods and participant evaluations were used to construct a case history and stakeholder profile of the AFHA initiative as well as to assess issues, perceived benefits, and visions as expressed by AFHA participants. Results underscore the diversity of interest groups coalescing into the heritage area movement. Issues raised by participants highlight many of the challenges heritage area projects face nationwide such as accommodating private property owner concerns not to limit their land use options. A preliminary research agenda for heritage areas is advanced as well as implications for heritage area policy and management.

Keywords: Heritage; parks; management; partnerships; tourism; planning; research

1.0 Introduction

The heritage area movement is gaining momentum in the United States, offering new opportunities for astute recreation and park managers to acquire financial resources and build relationships with new constituents. There are now 23 officially designated National Heritage Areas in the United States with 37 proposals

pending before the U.S. Congress to designate new National Heritage Areas. State heritage area programs are expanding at a rapid rate, with strong programs in Pennsylvania, Maryland, New York, and Utah to name a few. Brenda Barrett, National Park Service heritage area coordinator, estimates there are over 200 ad hoc heritage areas in the United States that have no "official" government designation (B. Barrett, personal communication, November 15, 2002).

Despite this rapid growth, there is little systematic data on the heritage area movement to support its efficient and effective growth. Proponents struggle to define just what a heritage area is. The National Park Service, charged by Congress to support National Heritage Areas, works to designate areas where, "natural, cultural, historic, and recreational resources combine for a cohesive, nationally-distinctive landscape arising from patterns of human activity shaped by geography" (Pillifant 2002). For example, the Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area in the Pittsburgh area tells the story of how the steel industry contributed to the rise of the industrial revolution in America. According to Mary Means (1999), heritage areas project the idea of a national park to the landscape or regional level and are implemented through partnerships between landowners, communities, businesses, and state and federal agencies. Perhaps one reason for the growth of the heritage area movement is there is something of value in it for many constituent groups (recreation; tourism; historic preservation; economic development).

Heritage areas are coordinated at a regional level, coalescing a diverse set of partners that have a common interest in the culture and history of the region. As such, the heritage area movement is redefining opportunities for traditional park and recreation agencies. New organizational forms and partnerships are emerging where state parks, national forests, recreation businesses, and community festivals and events often form the cornerstone of heritage areas while recreation and park managers often play leadership roles in these regional heritage initiatives. Participating in heritage area initiatives can offer new sources of financing to recreation agencies struggling to make ends meet in an era of fiscal uncertainty. Finally, the heritage area movement is in dire

need of sound applied management and social science research to guide management decisions and build political support for the movement. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to construct an agenda for applied research within the heritage area movement. This is accomplished by systematically examining the anatomy of a heritage area start-up, namely the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area (AFHA) in West Virginia and western Maryland. Case study research methods and participant evaluations are used to build a case history of the AFHA initiative as well as to create a descriptive profile of heritage area partners, their visions for the heritage area, personal and organizational benefits derived, and major issues/conflicts addressed in implementing the regional heritage area. Outcomes from three national workshops on the research needs of heritage areas are also summarized.

2.0 Methodology

Data for this research study was compiled using a case study research methodology (Yinn 1989). Multiple sources of data were collected to control for possible biases (Miles and Huberman 1984). Data sources included letters, agendas and minutes, administrative documents (reports, proposals, brochures) and newspaper clippings. Organizational and participant profile data were collected in three evaluation surveys administered at AFHA membership meetings in November 2001, March 2002, and September 2002. A case history of the AFHA initiative was compiled from the sources collected. Evaluation surveys were coded to reflect major themes and then recoded into sub-themes to reflect specific content (Strauss 1987).

3.0 The 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.

The inspiration for the creation of a forest heritage area was born when the residents of Webster Springs, WV proposed a Woodchopper's Village, building upon the success of their Woodchopper's Festival, a community celebration held annually to commemorate the rich forest heritage of the community. This community initiative

was noticed by a team of forestry and recreation and park faculty and extension agents at West Virginia University who applied for a USDA Fund for Rural America grant and thus the idea of a regional forest heritage area was born. The USDA was looking for proposals that crossed state borders so the forest heritage area was conceived as including the highland forest regions of West Virginia and western Maryland.

The Appalachian Forest Heritage Area (AFHA) initiative is now in the second year of a 44 -year USDA Fund for Rural America grant. Though budgetary control during the initial grant period resides with 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.

An initial project workshop was held at Blackwater Falls State Park in November 2001 and attended by over 90 people representing a diverse set of interests including resource management agencies, economic development authorities, educators, tourism officials, environmental groups, wood product firms, foresters, and community leaders. Participants grappled with the meaning of forest heritage and what the mission of the forest heritage area should be. An organizational structure was adopted for the implementing phase of the project consisting of a Project Leadership Team of staff and co-project investigators from West Virginia University and the Canaan Valley Institute, a Steering Committee composed of Leadership Team members and active community and government partners, and six Task Groups or sub-committees addressing topical issues such as: Asset Mapping, Interpretation, Business and Infrastructure, Networking, Organization and Sustainability, and Marketing.

Over the first year, the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area has adopted its formal name and refined its purpose and mission. Forest heritage is defined as, "the ongoing story of how the forest shapes history and culture, and how ecology and human use have shaped the forest" (AFHA 2002). The mission of the AFHA is:

"To work locally to conserve, develop, interpret, and promote a regional network of forest-based attractions and resources in the highlands of West Virginia and Maryland, for the enjoyment and

appreciation of residents and visitors, in order to enhance economic and community development.”

Though remaining somewhat flexible to consider new partners, the current geographic scale of the heritage area includes 15 counties in West Virginia and two counties in western Maryland. The Monongahela National Forest lies at the heart of the heritage area.

Task groups have been meeting regularly and two more general meetings were held in April 2002 and September 2002. Three pilot communities were identified including Webster Springs and Elkins in West Virginia and Oakland, Maryland. Project goals for year two of the AFHA initiative include administering a mini-grants program designed to support community-based initiatives that advance the regional goals of the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area. A “draft” list of local projects from Webster Springs included directional and interpretive signing for a historic sycamore tree, a loop tour and brochure for forest artisans in Webster County, and restoration of the Mollahan Mill, a 19th century grist mill in the area. Other short-term goals of AFHA include pursuing national designation of the heritage area; developing a memorandum of understanding with the Monongahela National Forest; and compiling a formal management plan for the heritage area. During the first 2 years of the project, efforts to leverage additional funding have been made to support AFHA projects. These projects include developing a digital archive of historic photographs and stories from the region, facilitating workshops on heritage trail development and marketing, and providing service-learning opportunities for natural resource management students at West Virginia University.

4.0 Profile of Partners

The future success of the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area will be dependent on the regional support of a diverse set of stakeholder groups. From its inception, the AFHA has relied heavily on the human, technical, and financial resources of many individuals and organizations. The 90 participants in the AFHA initial organizing meeting represented a unique confluence of interests that foreshadow the potential strength of the heritage area movement including: the economic development community, the tourism industry, historic preservation organizations, resource management agencies, environmental/conservation organizations, the wood

products industry, and educational institutions. Examples of participating interest groups from each of these topical areas are illustrated in Table 1. While the participation of a number of interest groups can be explained by the forest heritage theme, the mutual goal of expanding heritage tourism opportunities in the region seems to coalesce a potentially influential coalition of economic development, tourism, and historic preservation groups across many heritage area initiatives.

The organizations listed in Table 1 underscore the importance of community or place-based advocacy in the long-term success of the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area. Many of the voluntary historic preservation and environmental groups participating in the AFHA represent concerned local citizens with an abiding interest in one particular heritage or ecological site. For example, the Rich Mountain Battlefield Association works to preserve and tell the story of this historic Civil War battlefield. Members trace their lineage back to soldiers that fought here during the Civil War. These community groups are complemented by a number of participating organizations with regional management, development, promotion, or technical assistance roles in the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area. The Canaan Valley Institute is a good example with their regional support of community-based conservation and economic development efforts in the Middle Atlantic region. Above all, heritage areas bring together odd bedfellows. In the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area, for example, task group meetings might bring together a CEO of a large wood products corporation with a community leader who happens to be a monk and makes goat cheese for a living.

5.0 Partner Visions of Heritage Area

The 90 participants of the November 2001 general stakeholders’ meeting were asked to reflect on what their vision of the heritage area was. Not surprisingly, these responses were varied and in large part reflected the organizational and personal values of participants. Nevertheless, common themes run through the visions expressed by participants, articulating some of the underlying dynamics and social tensions of the heritage area movement. A commonly expressed dialectic was the regionalism versus local control theme. Regionalism was often couched in the language of cooperation, partnerships, coordination, interdependence, or networking. Typical regional visions expressed were,

Table 1.—Selected Interest Groups Participating in AFHA by Topical Area

Topical Area	Interest Group
Economic Development	West Virginia Development Office West Virginia Rural Development Council West Virginia Bureau of Commerce Webster County Development Authority Region VII Economic Development Authority Randolph County Chamber of Commerce
Tourism	West Virginia Division of Tourism Randolph County Convention and Visitors Bureau Maryland Office of Tourism Development Pocahontas County Convention and Visitors Bureau Pendleton County Visitors Committee
Historic Preservation	Preservation Alliance of West Virginia Potomac Heritage Partnership Rich Mountain Battlefield Association Aurora Area Heritage Society Elkins Historic Landmarks Commission Mountain State Railroad & Logging Historical Association
Resource Management	USDA Forest Service DOI National Park Service Maryland Department of Natural Resources West Virginia Division of Forestry DOI US Fish and Wildlife Service Woodland Owners Association of West Virginia
Environmental/Conservation	Canaan Valley Institute West Virginia Highlands Conservancy Shaver's Fork Coalition Conservation International West Virginia Land Trust
Wood Products Industry	West Virginia Forestry Association Georgia Pacific Corporation Allegheny Wood Products Mead Wesvaco Corporation
Education	West Virginia University Forest Management Program WVU Recreation, Parks, and Tourism Resources Program WVU Extension Service WVU Bureau of Business Research WVU Office of Service Learning

“the Forest Heritage Area is about establishing an umbrella of communities for planning the development, interpretation, and promotion of forest-based attractions” or “the Forest Heritage Area is a centrally administered transportation, experience, and information network of routes and trails.” On the other end of the spectrum, community leaders often emphasized the importance of local control and validation for the heritage area. For example, “the heritage area should be sustained by community consensus and support by school systems and

civic organization” or “the heritage area should serve to document and conserve local histories and reflect local roots that are shared with the visitor.”

Participant visions for the Forest Heritage Area also reinforced the realization that heritage areas represent a new kind of sustainable development, one that integrates historic preservation, tourism, and economic development. Historic preservation advocates emphasized the importance of preservation in restoring

rural economies. “Communities are discovering how well the preservation of historic, cultural, and natural resources combines with tourism development to enable communities to diversify their economies and promote traditional ways of life.” Regional economic development authorities tended to focus on the commerce potential of the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area typified by comments such as, “[the Forest Heritage Area will] create commerce through the development, preservation, interpretation, and promotion of forest-based attractions in the region.” State tourism officials and representatives of regional Convention and Visitors Bureaus portrayed the Forest Heritage Area as a heritage tourism initiative. “Heritage tourism is an important economic development strategy for rural communities in West Virginia. It offers an outstanding opportunity to encourage diversified economic development.” Finally, somewhat unique to the forest and forestry heritage theme of the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area, forest industry representatives and forestry consultants see the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area as an opportunity to educate the public about forestry practices and wood products.

“The trail emphasizes the amazing resiliency of the Appalachian hardwood forest and changes in attitudes and treatment of the forest from the era of manifest destiny to the development of modern forest stewardship and the rapidly evolving science of applied woodland management. It is important for visitors to the Mountain State, as well as those who live here, to understand the significant role forests played in the lives of West Virginia’s early settlers.”

6.0 Perceived Benefits of Heritage Area

Participants of the November 2001 stakeholder’s meeting identified a diverse set of benefits or outcomes that could result from the heritage area initiative. These benefits can be categorized into community, economic, cultural, educational, environmental, and collaboration benefits as outlined in Table 2. These are similar to benefit categories identified by the Northern Forest Center (2000) in their analysis of the Northern Forest region that includes portions of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and New York. Both the Northern Forest and Appalachian region share a rich forest heritage. Based upon participant responses, a sixth benefit category, collaboration, was added to coalesce the significant number of references to the importance of building partnerships, working

together, and building common ground and trust across political, geographic, administrative, and stakeholder boundaries. This benefit category is more of a process indicator but has emerged as an important objective of the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area. Taken together, this set of benefit categories and item can serve as a starting point for monitoring studies, examining the effectiveness and impact of heritage area initiatives.

7.0 Heritage Area Issues

The planning process to develop the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area has not been without its growing pains and challenges. Strong efforts have been made to be inclusive, encouraging active participation from the broadest set of stakeholder groups. This has inevitably led to occasional differences of opinion between participating organizations and interest groups. For example, at the initial project workshop in November 2001, a disagreement emerged over whether the heritage area should focus on forest heritage or forestry heritage. Participating wood products firm representatives and forestry advocates felt strongly that the project should focus more narrowly on the history and practice of forestry while representatives of environmental and watershed groups advocated for a broader project focus of forest heritage—one that included forestry but also encompassed forest ecology, preservation, and forest-based artisans. Eventually, a consensus decision was made at the April 2002 general stakeholders meeting to move forward under the more inclusive forest heritage theme, however the decision has dissatisfied some project stakeholders.

A second issue or challenge for the heritage area has been accommodating property rights concerns of project stakeholders and county landowners. In West Virginia and western Maryland and, indeed, nationally — property rights issues have emerged as a major constraint to heritage area development and the passage of national enabling legislation for heritage areas. Corporate and private landowners want assurances that heritage area designation will not limit their land use options through increased regulations or federal government purchase of land. The National Park Service counters by asserting that the heritage area approach is based on locally driven partnerships that emphasize local control of land (Hoffman 2003). In the AFHA region of West Virginia and western Maryland, approximately 83 percent of the land area is privately owned, 7 percent industry owned,

Table 2.—Perceived Benefits Resulting from Heritage Area

Benefit Categories	Benefit Items
Community	build social capital increase community pride enhance sense of place improve quality of life stimulate other development initiatives
Economic	create jobs increase private investment improve small business opportunities diversify local economy enhance leveraging of outside dollars increase number of heritage tourists
Cultural	celebrate and conserve local history preserve cultural traditions protect traditional ways of life
Educational	visitor appreciation of forestry practices local appreciation for regional history understanding the role forests have played inspire visitor sense of place foster wonder and appreciation for forests
Environmental	preservation of forests stewardship of natural resources contribute to sustainable forest management practices protect special places
Collaboration	build common ground and trust opportunity to work together build partnerships better communication and working relationship promote regional planning/cooperative approach

and 10 percent are publicly owned lands. So far, AFHA has accommodated these concerns by developing an asset mapping protocol where forest-based attractions can only be listed with the landowner's permission. If a landowner refuses to list a potential heritage area asset, for example an old sawmill foundation, then the site is not listed in the regional asset map being compiled.

8.0 Developing a Research Agenda for Heritage Areas

Despite the growth of the heritage area movement, little systematic research has been conducted on heritage areas to guide public policy and program implementation. Responding to this critical need, the National Park Service and the National Trust for Historic Preservation convened a workshop in November 2002 to construct a research agenda for heritage areas (National Park Service

2002). Workshop participants identified a number of potential research topics including the need to monitor both the economic and community impacts of national heritage areas. This work will be facilitated by the coordinated identification of appropriate economic and community well-being indicators such as those advanced by the Northern Forest Center (2000). Other research topics suggested by participants included identifying keys to successful heritage area planning and potential constraints through case histories of different heritage areas. Visitor profile and decision-making data is also needed to guide heritage area management and communication strategies. Many other questions were identified that could provide support for future research. What factors are impelling the heritage area movement? Do these factors vary by region? What is motivating different stakeholder groups to either support or oppose

heritage area formation? Finally, workshop participants agreed that a coordinated research program is needed to address these questions as well as dedicated financial support provided through the National Park Service and national heritage and preservation foundations.

9.0 Conclusions

Heritage areas hold much promise for recreation and park managers to partner with new constituent groups and acquire new sources of financing. Heritage areas are contributing sustainable economic benefits to rural regions throughout America in addition to enhancing community pride and well-being. However, systematic research and monitoring of heritage areas is still in its infancy.

Preliminary results from this study underscore the diversity of interest groups that are coalescing into the heritage area movement. While this diversity is a potential strength, it can also be a weakness as heritage areas transcend the statutory duties of any single land-holding agency and rely heavily on coordinated management at the landscape level. Results also illustrate how heritage areas are emerging as a new form of sustainable development, one that integrates historic preservation, tourism, the wood products industry, and economic development. Finally, the birthing process of the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area highlights the many challenges heritage area projects face nationwide such as accommodating private property owner concerns not to limit their land use options.

The Appalachian Forest Heritage Area, initially conceived in the crucible of a university setting, is in a unique position to serve as a model or demonstration project for future heritage areas. Lessons learned, economic and social benefits derived, and implementation constraints will be continuously monitored and reported to the larger heritage, tourism, and recreation and park communities.

Heritage areas, like 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. Park and recreation managers and researchers need to seize upon this emerging opportunity.

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