

CHAPTER III MEETING IN THE MOUNTAINS: THE BLUE RIDGE NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA

Introduction

The concept of heritage tourism is not new to the Blue Ridge Mountains. During the New Deal era, construction of the Blue Ridge Parkway was hailed by planners and many local people as a means to bringing tourist dollars into economically depressed mountain communities. “As mountain farms and cutover forests were abandoned by impoverished inhabitants,” writes landscape architect Ethan Carr, “the Blue Ridge Parkway was the means of planning and enabling coordinated outdoor recreational land uses as the basis of new regional economies.”¹⁰⁹ In the decades since, the Blue Ridge Parkway has been an unqualified success, at least in terms of popularity. By 1965, thirty years after construction began on the route, the parkway had 8 million visits per year. Four decades later, that number has grown to nearly 18 million (in federal fiscal year 2004), making the parkway one of the most visited units of the National Park System.¹¹⁰

With so many visitors coming to the mountains each year, by the end of the 20th century, park planners were concerned that unchecked development in the southern Appalachians was threatening the scenic vistas for which the parkway was known. Furthermore, gateway communities have become sprawling and congested. Unlike Shenandoah and Great Smoky Mountains National Parks, for which vast tracts of land had been acquired, the linear parkway was forced to rely on state, local, and private land managers to preserve the long-distance mountain vistas that defined the parkway

experience. National Park staff and community leaders had no organized, long-term framework in which to collectively promote and protect their shared resources.¹¹¹

In response to these exigencies, a coalition of local, tribal, state, federal, and nonprofit partners, with leadership and support from the National Park Service, created an informal alliance in 1997 that became known as the Blue Ridge Heritage Initiative. Initially, according to the Park Service, the primary goals of the alliance were “to augment protection of the Blue Ridge Parkway through enhancing heritage tourism and guiding gateway community growth...and to encourage solutions that exemplify the homemade, personalized hospitality of the mountain rural communities.” Later, the focus of the initiative would expand from protecting and enhancing the Blue Ridge Parkway to an organized effort to establish a national heritage area in western North Carolina.¹¹²

Established in 2003, the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area includes two national parks (the Blue Ridge Parkway and Great Smoky Mountains), two national forests (the Nantahala and the Pisgah), 13 scenic byways and two national scenic byways, two national historic trails, one national historic site, seven state parks, and more than 400 sites listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The heritage area is the outgrowth of well-established local efforts to preserve traditions, folk arts, and heritage resources in the region. Yet, this sprawling heritage effort poses several challenges going forward, including engagement of the disparate and numerous partners in the region, funding and tourism, and a shifting economy in a largely rural area.

This chapter will discuss the partners in the Blue Ridge Heritage Initiative, the planning process for national heritage area designation, and the interpretive themes the partners settled on, and it will conclude with an evaluation of the extent to which the

initiative incorporated the factors for possible success that were identified in Chapter I and how their efforts might point to future success.

Identifying and Engaging Partners

To begin the planning process for the heritage initiative, Blue Ridge Parkway Superintendent Dan Brown, along with key parkway staff, contacted the leaders of established arts and cultural organizations in the region, as well as tourism councils and chambers of commerce, which were well known in the region for promoting and preserving North Carolina heritage. These groups had well-established ties to local artists, preservation groups, and craftspeople, but they also understood the issues of fundraising, political maneuvering, and public relations. In addition to the National Park Service, the primary partners who led the Blue Ridge Heritage Initiative were the North Carolina Arts Council, Tennessee Arts Commission, Virginia Commission for the Arts, North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, North Carolina Division of Travel and Tourism, North Carolina Department of Commerce, Tennessee Overhill Heritage Association, Tennessee Department of Tourism, Tennessee State Parks, HandMade in America, and the Cherokee National Forest. As the keepers of some of the oldest cultural traditions in the region, the Eastern Band of the Cherokee was considered a key partner from the outset.¹¹³

Partners in the heritage initiative were engaged because of their perceived ability to collaborate successfully and raise money and awareness for the Blue Ridge region. In the feasibility study for the heritage area (published later, in 2002), the authors noted that the region, “rich in successful non-profit organizations, has already reached impressive

milestones in building an infrastructure that can support and benefit from being designated as a National Heritage Area....They know how to work cooperatively to make the area successful and have demonstrated their ability to accomplish important objectives by working effectively together.”¹¹⁴

With the 469-mile parkway as a focal point, initial outreach focused on a large four-state area. Although the initiative considered North Carolina its headquarters, funding was also sought for arts preservation projects in Virginia, Tennessee, and Georgia. The North Carolina Arts Council, a state agency under the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, took a critical first step by applying for and winning a \$225,000 challenge grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, to be used for economic development and cultural preservation in the counties that border the Blue Ridge Parkway. The arts council in turn sub-granted monies to the Tennessee Overhill Heritage Association and the Virginia Humanities Council to administer projects in those two states. Matching funds were raised by the Appalachian Regional Commission, the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, and American Express.¹¹⁵

Aside from an organization’s contacts and partnership capabilities, the heritage initiative also turned to organizations that had developed an infrastructure through which to identify and interview local artisans, historians, and cultural representatives, those “subject matter experts” who would define the direction of heritage tourism and preservation activities. One such group, HandMade in America, led by executive director Becky Anderson, is a nonprofit organization that promotes sustainable economic development for North Carolina craftspeople. In the mid-1990s, before the heritage initiative was formed, HandMade had produced a well-received guidebook to the area’s

craft centers. Based on exhaustive interviews with local community representatives, HandMade identified hundreds of historic craft sites, private studios, art shops and galleries, historic lodging, and restaurants, organized into a series of eight trails that all spin off the Blue Ridge Parkway. Titled *The Craft Heritage Trails of Western North Carolina*, the book is widely distributed throughout the region. Now in its third edition, the guidebook has sold more than 45,000 copies since 1996, and participating shops and galleries have reported up to a 24-percent increase in sales since the book's publication.¹¹⁶

Finally, a major player in the heritage area planning process is AdvantageWest North Carolina, a public-private economic development partnership established in 1994 and charged with creating regional projects that boost the economy and visibility of western North Carolina. The organization is funded by appropriations from both the North Carolina General Assembly and investments from the private sector. Primarily concerned with marketing and tourism, AdvantageWest has invested more than \$1 million in a Cooperative Marketing Grant program for the local tourism industry, which has in turn leveraged \$1.6 million in private funds. AdvantageWest also works closely with a volunteer Heritage Tourism Advisory Committee that includes representatives from HandMade in America, regional tourist attractions, and the Cherokee Nation. Dale Carroll, president and CEO of AdvantageWest, and Betty Huskins, senior vice president, took the lead in representing the organization in the Blue Ridge Heritage Initiative.¹¹⁷

Both AdvantageWest and HandMade in America have experience in drawing out community participation in cultural exchanges, resource inventories, and other heritage preservation projects. Between 1995 and 1998, HandMade facilitated more than 50

public meetings on projects related to the craft heritage trails, which spawned several community-driven historic resource inventories and preservation priority lists.¹¹⁸

Planning for the National Heritage Area

After identifying the primary partners that would lead the planning effort, the next step involved producing a formal feasibility study and plan for the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area. In 2001, the North Carolina General Assembly passed legislation to fund the feasibility study and create a Blue Ridge National Heritage Area Commission to oversee the development of heritage area legislation. Prepared by AdvantageWest North Carolina and HandMade in America and published in June 2002, the study summarized the regional and national significance of western North Carolina, presented the previous accomplishments of the Blue Ridge Heritage Initiative, identified a preliminary business plan and management team, and included maps of the natural and cultural sites that would be included in the designation (Fig. 9). The study addressed how the heritage area would satisfy National Park Service criteria for heritage areas, including evidence of existing partnerships and opportunities for preservation, education, and economic development.¹¹⁹

The Blue Ridge National Heritage Area Commission included representatives from the North Carolina general assembly, local universities, the National Park Service and the U.S. Forest Service, the Eastern Band of the Cherokee, local tourist attractions and historic sites, and community organizations. Many of these representatives offered endorsements of the heritage area, which were included in the feasibility study, and spoke of the potential for tourism income and recognition, as well as the need for heritage

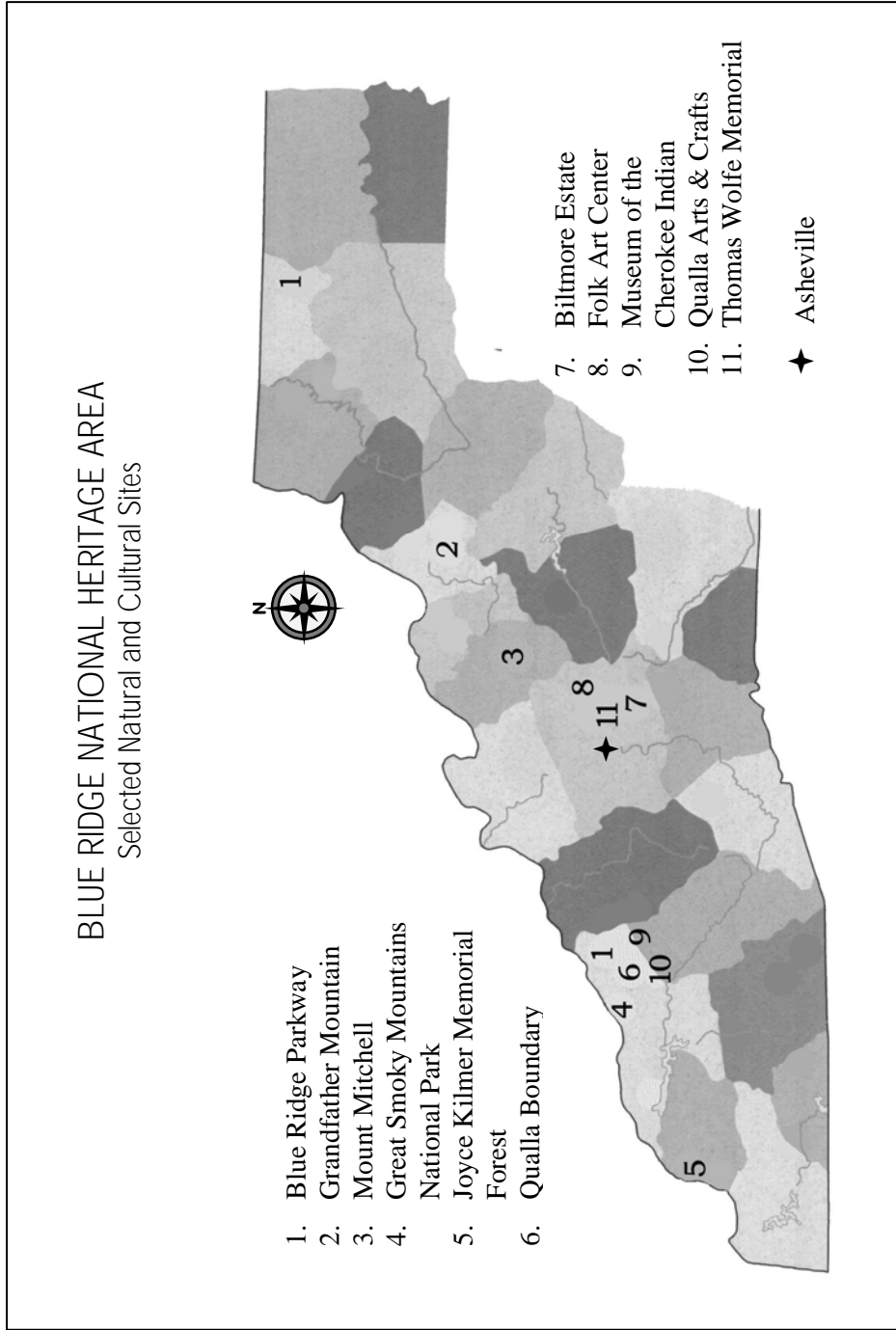


Fig. 9. Map of the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area, highlighting selected natural and cultural sites. The heritage area is bounded by Virginia to the north, South Carolina to the south, and Tennessee to the west. Reprinted from *Advantage West North Carolina and HandMade in America, Western North Carolina National Heritage Area Feasibility Study & Plan* (June 2002), 51, with modifications by author.

preservation. In his letter of support for the designation, Leon Jones, principal chief of the Eastern Band of the Cherokee, wrote, “The ancestors of the Cherokee have in some way influenced the way of life of all who inhabit the land of Western North Carolina, as well as the millions of tourists who visit here each year to learn more about their own heritage. This process...is important to the Eastern Band and has my wholehearted support.”¹²⁰

Throughout the planning process for the heritage area, authenticity was an oft-repeated objective, advancing the idea that sites and events included in the heritage area should celebrate the arts and crafts produced in the region, not facsimiles produced elsewhere. Instead of channeling visitors to historic and natural sites that celebrated local cultural resources, heritage area planners contended, “visitors have been diverted to commercial tourist attractions that have little to do with traditional regional culture.”¹²¹ On the Tennessee side of the Great Smoky Mountains, for example, the congested commercial strip of Pigeon Forge features the Dollywood theme park and the Hill-Billy Village, where tourists can purchase stuffed “Smoky Mountain” black bears and toy Indian tomahawks.¹²² The Blue Ridge Heritage Initiative, by contrast, was predicated on the notion that, given the option, tourists would be interested in supporting actual cultural traditions and artists, thereby ensuring the ongoing preservation of the culture, crafts, and historic sites of the region.¹²³

In 2003, Congressman Charles Taylor and then-Senator John Edwards introduced legislation in both houses of Congress to designate the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area. The legislation was subsequently included in the Interior Appropriations bill for fiscal year 2004, which was approved by Congress and signed by the president in November 2003, appropriating \$500,000 in first-year funding for the heritage area.¹²⁴ The

legislation created a Blue Ridge National Heritage Area Board, which included representatives from local businesses and cultural groups appointed by HandMade in America, the governor, AdvantageWest, and the Cherokee Indians. The board was charged with identifying grant-making organizations that would match federal dollars for specific projects. For example, projects to create interpretive panels for Cherokee sites had funding commitments from the North Carolina Arts Council, Cherokee County Historical Museum, and the Cherokee Heritage Foundation. The North Carolina Department of Transportation agreed to triple the \$30,000 allocated in federal funding for a new exhibit on the heritage area at the Blue Ridge Parkway's Folk Art Center in Asheville. Finally, the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation offered a \$50,000 grant to cover one year of staffing.¹²⁵

At a November 2003 Management Entity Board meeting, the group voted to name AdvantageWest the lead management agency for the heritage area, primarily because it already had the 501(c)3 tax status needed to draw down federal funds and begin applying monies to heritage area projects.¹²⁶ Moving forward, the group agreed to continue to engage the organizations that were well-established and known to the leaders of the heritage initiative. Beyond this, the group also expressed an interest in working with those as-yet-unidentified parties and individuals with a “demonstrated interest in and expertise” related to the heritage of Western North Carolina, although no formal group was established to reach out to these other entities.¹²⁷

In February 2004, Western North Carolina Tomorrow, a division of Western Carolina University's Center for Regional Development, was awarded a contract from the management entity to facilitate the region-wide master planning process for the heritage

area. Taking a ground-up approach, the organization has convened a “regional resource team” to oversee the development of 26 county-level plans. The regional team includes representatives from state agencies, HandMade in America, local universities, and councils of governments. For each county plan, a county-appointed Heritage Council would identify and coordinate input from stakeholders, compile an inventory of heritage resources, and coordinate two public meetings at the beginning and the end of the information-gathering stage to solicit and incorporate local input. After this, the county would create a Heritage Plan with specific initiatives and estimated costs. The county plans would then be synthesized into three sub-regional plans, which would in turn feed into a master plan for the heritage area.¹²⁸

In April 2005, the heritage area management board named Penn Dameron, a local attorney and bluegrass musician, as executive director of the heritage area.¹²⁹ In May 2005, the heritage area received \$900,000 in federal funding for its second year of operation, which will be used for grants and the construction of the official website: www.blueridgeheritage.com. Congressman Taylor has also secured \$4 million in federal funding for the new Blue Ridge Destination Center in Asheville, a nearly 12,000-square foot structure just off the Blue Ridge Parkway, which will house the heritage area offices. Taylor also has indicated his interest in developing “interactive kiosks” that would let Parkway visitors make reservations at area hotels and local attractions.¹³⁰

Interpretive Themes

When the management entity was working with Congressman Taylor on national heritage area legislation, Taylor had asked them to come up with a list of primary projects

that would be funded with the first year's federal appropriation. To “come out of the chute” with ideas, as they put it, Betty Huskins of AdvantageWest and Becky Anderson of HandMade in America adopted four primary themes around which projects would be developed—crafts, music, Cherokee heritage, and agriculture—based on four guidebooks that had been produced as part of the Blue Ridge Heritage Initiative. Although these four books were developed before the heritage area was officially designated, a brief history of their development offers insight into existing partnerships in the region.¹³¹

In developing the *Craft Heritage Trails* guidebook, the first of the four guidebooks, HandMade in America had worked with local craftsmen and women, business owners, chambers of commerce, tourism offices, state and local governments, and Cherokee leaders to identify more than 400 craft-related sites in 23 counties. As part of the process, HandMade had forged several partnerships in the region. To continue to foster the Blue Ridge crafting tradition, for example, the Stecoah Valley Center and the North Carolina Arts Council created a skills training program for traditional weaving (Fig. 10). Marrying traditional arts with modern technologies, HandMade also partnered with a local environmental group and community college to create space for glassblowers and potters at a former landfill, with kilns fueled by burned landfill methane.¹³²

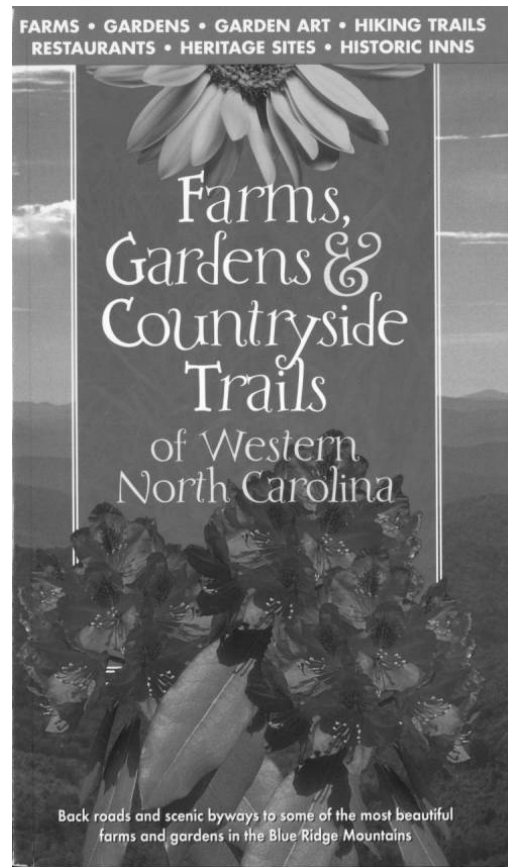
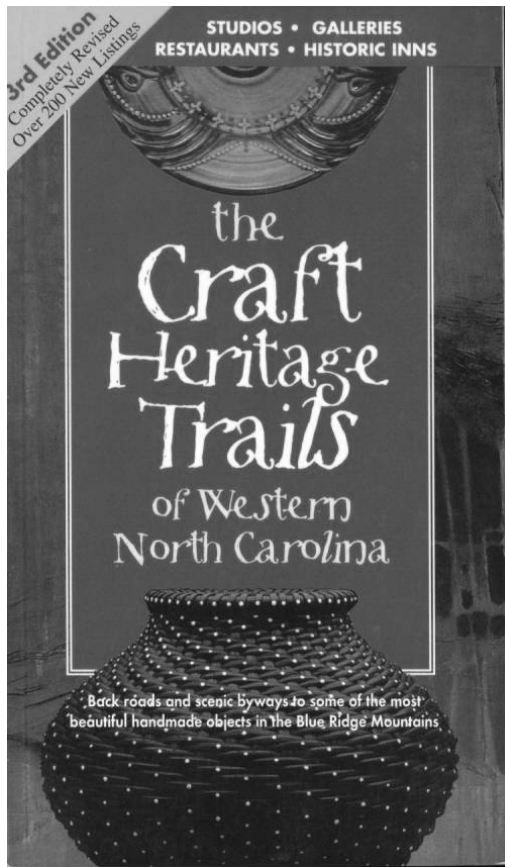
To build on these kinds of relationships, the heritage initiative agreed on three additional themes around which heritage trails would be developed: Blue Ridge music, Cherokee arts and culture, and gardening and agriculture. Although the categories were broad and somewhat obvious, they provided frameworks through which a vast diversity of projects could be developed. Each of the themes would be developed into a guidebook following the *Craft Heritage Trails* model. “Developing heritage trails was a conscious



Figure 10. Traditional weaving is practiced at the Folk Art Center on the Blue Ridge Parkway near Asheville, now part of the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area. Photograph by author (22 March 2005).

decision by the team to showcase themes that are immediately recognizable, yet often maligned in depicting Appalachia,” former park planner Laura Rotegard has stated. “The team chose this approach to demonstrate that the region is a viable heritage designation, with many voices and assets, all needing increased protection, as they are experienced along the Blue Ridge Parkway.”¹³³

In developing the new guidebooks, members of the heritage initiative devoted hundreds of hours to attending meetings, interviewing community representatives, and raising money. The initiative concluded that mountain people were very concerned about “the erosion of their distinctive culture and those places associated with it, public or private,” and that they supported heritage preservation efforts.¹³⁴ The first edition of



Figures 11a and 11b. The first two heritage trail guidebooks, focused on crafts and rural and agricultural character, produced by the Blue Ridge Heritage Initiative. Covers courtesy of HandMade in America.

Farms, Gardens & Countryside Trails of Western North Carolina was published in 2002, followed the next year by the third edition of *Craft Heritage Trails* and the last two guidebooks, *Cherokee Heritage Trails Guidebook* and *Blue Ridge Music Trails: A Place in the Circle*.¹³⁵ In addition to producing attractive, whimsically designed, and user-friendly guidebooks (Figs. 11a and 11b), the heritage initiative believed that discrete trails would help frame and organize the future heritage area, making it easier for visitors, legislators, and other potential supporters to grasp. “Where other heritage areas...struggle to create a circulation system,” Rotegard observes, “the Blue Ridge region had the circulation spine (the parkway) [and] the national significance, but lacked regional

connection and focus. The team is building trails to foster community pride, which in turn activates protection of cultural, natural, and scenic resources.”¹³⁶

The Cherokee trails project, for one, represented an important opportunity to engage this significant and underrepresented group. The *Cherokee Heritage Trails* book identifies culturally important sites to the tribe, providing interpretation from a Cherokee perspective. Organized the sites around six towns, the book highlights the locations of ancient Cherokee settlements, museums that display Cherokee artifacts, and natural sites that have significance in Cherokee myths and legends. In addition to Cherokee cultural leaders and local heritage groups, a leading partner in this effort is the Museum of the Cherokee Indian, located in the heart of the Qualla Boundary, as the ancestral Cherokee lands are known. The museum developed the companion web site, found at cherokeeheritagetrails.org, which includes overviews of the six towns, as well interactive maps with links to site descriptions.¹³⁷

According to Barbara Duncan, a folklorist and education director at the Museum of the Cherokee Indian, the Eastern Band was involved in local and regional heritage preservation efforts from nearly the moment they began in 1995. “People of the Eastern Band were involved every step of the way,” she states. “We created a task force, with members from the North Carolina arts council and representatives from Tennessee and North Carolina. Half were members of the Eastern band.”¹³⁸

The *Blue Ridge Music Trails* guidebook highlights venues and festival sites related to the creation and performance of traditional string-band music, bluegrass, ballad singing, blues, and gospel music (Fig. 12). Partners for the project include the Blue Ridge Institute and Museum of Ferrum College, Virginia, which developed the inventory of



Figure 12. A bluegrass band plays an outdoor festival inside the Qualla Boundary in Cherokee, North Carolina. Photograph by author (24 March 2005).

music venues in Virginia and developed the companion web site, blueridgemusictrails.org, as well as the Virginia Commission for the Arts, which provided planning assistance and funding. As with the Cherokee trails, the companion web site includes an interactive map.¹³⁹ Finally, the *Farms, Gardens, and Countryside Trails* book guides visitors through 87 mountain communities that represent the region's rural and agricultural heritage. Partners include the North Carolina Arboretum and the Conservation Trust for North Carolina, which helped develop demonstration gardens for the production of natural dyes and plants used in making brooms, baskets, and paper.¹⁴⁰

Among other outcomes, the Blue Ridge Heritage Initiative, according to Laura Rotegard, boosted support for the National Park Service from the "very families that once held it in distaste sixty years ago."¹⁴¹ As previously discussed, the relationship between

mountain people and the federal government has not been universally troubled. Yet the idea of a conflicted relationship, if not the reality, endures in some quarters to this day.

At least one group found the planning process to change their views of the federal government. The Eastern Band of the Cherokee, when scouting the Blue Ridge region for sites to include in their heritage trails guidebook, found that, to their surprise, the best-preserved Cherokee sites were on federally owned land, which engendered a greater sense of trust about federal involvement in the heritage area. Furthermore, funding from the heritage area allows the Cherokee to train tour guides to take groups around the trails. Before, Cherokee people knew about the sites but rarely visited them in any organized way. “These places were important to Cherokee people, but that land was taken away,” Barbara Duncan says. “To me, the Cherokee trails project is a way of reclaiming that Cherokee land in a spiritual sense, in a cultural sense. My impression from the comments we’ve received from tribal people is that they appreciated efforts to recognize these Cherokee places. Any time that you acknowledge the history and reclaim that heritage, it’s healing.”¹⁴²

Evaluating Factors for Success

As discussed in Chapter I, this thesis is investigating the hypothesis that certain factors must exist to increase the likelihood of a successful heritage area. Like the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor, the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area has demonstrated most of the likely factors for success, to varying degrees. Once again, these factors include: a) the existence of active local constituencies with a history of preservation and conservation efforts; b) a clearly defined regional network of existing

national, state, or local parks that relate to the identified themes of the heritage area; c) working partnerships and processes for civic engagement; d) mechanisms for engaging diverse community members and overcoming barriers to participation; e) continued expression of cultural traditions; f) a sustainable income stream from heritage tourism, and g) methods of dealing with threats to cultural and natural resources.

Existence of Active Local Constituencies

Like the Blackstone River Valley, communities throughout the Blue Ridge region had set the stage for heritage planning and partnerships by fostering active community groups and numerous nonprofit organizations. Leading organizations include the North Carolina Arts Council, HandMade in America, and the Eastern Band of the Cherokee, all of which have experience working with communities on arts, crafts, and heritage education projects.

Through its Small Town Revitalization Project, for example, HandMade has worked with more than a dozen communities, including Chimney Rock, West Jefferson, and Bryson City, to renovate nearly 150 buildings and create 104 new businesses.¹⁴³ As Carole Summers, director of tourism for HandMade in America, states, “Designation of the heritage area is not the end of the process. It’s just an honor bestowed on the work that has already been done.”¹⁴⁴

Among the most active and organized constituencies in the heritage area is the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indian, which has hosted a variety of heritage preservation events for decades. Created in the 1940s, the Cherokee Historical Association has sponsored the production of “Unto these Hills,” an outdoor drama about the events

leading up to the Trail of Tears, since 1950. The association opened the Oconaluftee Indian Village, an open-air museum of native crafts and goods, in 1952. In the 1980s, three regional tourism organizations, High Country Host, Smoky Mountain Host, and Blue Ridge Mountain Host, were created to provide a venue in which local businesses could interact and forge partnerships.¹⁴⁵

Clearly Defined Regional Network

A primary strength of the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area is the fact that it is confined to one clearly delineated geographic area: the Blue Ridge Mountains of western North Carolina. Furthermore, the heritage area is organized around the Blue Ridge Parkway, a well-known circulation route. Running through most of the length of the national heritage area, the parkway connects two national parks, Shenandoah and Great Smoky Mountains, and is a natural starting point for heritage area touring. Numerous state and local parks and historic sites are found within easy driving distance of the parkway. The Blue Ridge Heritage Initiative, in creating four distinct heritage trails guidebooks, has furthered organized current and potential heritage area sites according to their locations along the parkway or, in the case of the Cherokee book, around six towns in the region. Although the parkway is a natural starting point, visitors have numerous opportunities to venture off the parkway, stay in local towns, and spend their tourist dollars.

Despite the success of the four guidebooks, however, throughout the heritage area there are few recognizable signs and interpretative materials to guide heritage area visitors. As yet, the heritage area has not branded itself through the use of logos or other

unifying elements, and the official web site is still under construction, offering no more than a simple overview page. The Shenandoah Valley Battlefields National Historic District, for example, has placed large signs at key entry points to the valley, all unified with an eye-catching graphic of a Civil War soldier. Even the four guidebooks could benefit from better branding; although the crafts and farm trails books are designed in a similar style, the mountain music and Cherokee books look entirely different. Unifying the guidebooks under a common logo or banner would likely raise the visibility of all four heritage area themes and the sites associated with them.

Working Partnerships and Processes for Civic Engagement

The Blue Ridge National Heritage Area, by and large, is the product of several strong working partnerships among local, tribal, state, and federal agencies, as well as successful capitalization of different groups' fundraising and community outreach capabilities. The partnerships have even won several recent honors, including the 2004 Preserve America Presidential Award and a 2002 National Park Partnerships Award.¹⁴⁶

Despite this, some stakeholders have raised concerns that funding is too often channeled to marquee sites or institutions, such as the Biltmore Estate or the North Carolina Museum of Art, which already have an established infrastructure for funding, rather than to smaller partnership-driven projects.¹⁴⁷ Furthermore, one representative of a key partnering organization, speaking under condition of anonymity, has expressed concerns that, with a marketing and tourism organization like AdvantageWest at the helm, the heritage area will focus too much on tourism and not enough on heritage. The fact that the heritage area team has aligned itself with a brand-new, politically backed,

multi-million-dollar “destination center,” instead of headquartering in a historic district or adaptively using an existing historic building, may be telling.

Still, the ground-up planning process for the heritage area, which relies on local leaders at the county level to identify important heritage resources and make judgments about preservation priorities, provides a key mechanism for local involvement. The broad base of community and organizational representatives on the heritage area management board also provides a conduit for various constituencies to be heard.

Mechanisms for Overcoming Barriers to Participation

As mentioned above, the heritage area has instituted a ground-up planning process to engage communities at the local level, rather than a top-down approach beginning with the federal government, for example. This may be the best mechanism in which to engage those potential constituents who might not otherwise be participating in the heritage area, for various reasons such as socioeconomic class or wariness of government intervention. The Eastern Band of the Cherokee, although a minority group, has been a valued and involved participant in the heritage initiative from the beginning. But the widespread participation of other groups, such as African Americans, is not evident. Tapping into the expertise of groups like HandMade in America, however, which has sought out communities that are economically depressed for its Small Town Revitalization Project, may raise awareness among underrepresented communities about the heritage area. There is evidence that management board members are sensitive to the fact that not all the voices in the region are being heard. Becky Anderson, HandMade’s executive director, made a point at one management board meeting to remind participants that “the region

needed to have a say” in how federal funds were spent.¹⁴⁸ Ostensibly, the master planning process should ensure that this happens.

Continued Expression of Cultural Traditions

Another major strength of the heritage area, as illustrated in the Blackstone Valley, is the fact that heritage area planning and funding are geared toward the active continuation of the arts, crafts, music, and oral traditions that are represented by the heritage area. For the Eastern Band of the Cherokee, the Blue Ridge heritage initiative and the trail guide provide a much-desired opportunity to interpret its own history. “It’s important that we be able to tell our history,” says Lynn Harlan, cultural resources director for the Eastern Band. “The best example of this is the Holocaust Museum [in Washington, D.C.]. That is Jewish history told from the Jewish perspective.”¹⁴⁹

In the process of conducting resource inventories to develop the *Cherokee Heritage Trails* book, the Cherokee nation gathered so much information that it spearheaded the additional publication of *The Cherokee Artist Directory*. The directory promotes more than 50 Cherokee representatives as the best practitioners of the tribe’s traditional culture, available to present programs on Cherokee craft, music and storytelling, and textile arts from a first-person perspective. A section called “Honoring the Elders” profiles the tribe’s most respected tradition-bearers. One storyteller, Robert Bushyhead, has urged subsequent generations to learn, write, and record the traditional Cherokee language. “Cherokee has a flow; it has a rhythm that is beautiful,” Bushyhead says. “Once you lose that rhythm, then, of course, you’re lost.”¹⁵⁰

The music component of the heritage initiative is also successful, as evidenced by the growth in projects that cultivate traditional Blue Ridge music, especially in the classroom. Local teachers have expressed concern about the loss of music education in the schools, so much so that one account noted that boosting tourism to the region risked “diluting local culture even more with mass-market music...eroding the connections children had to their cultural heritage.”¹⁵¹ To counteract this concern, two new projects have been implemented as a result of the Blue Ridge Heritage Initiative. The North Carolina Curriculum, Music and Community project brings local musicians into the school system, where they engage students in song-writing and learning about traditional string-band music and other folk genres. The Junior Appalachian Musicians (JAM) program is an after-school activity in which young students work with local musicians. One evaluation in the Stecoah Valley area noted that participation in after-school programs had increased 81 percent since the JAM program was implemented.¹⁵²

Sustainable Income Stream from Heritage Tourism

Economically, the Blue Ridge region already has successfully leveraged heritage area funding to boost heritage tourism efforts. Heritage initiative partners estimate that the heritage trails and their spin-off projects have attracted about \$2 million in funding. In addition, an estimated 2,000 visitor survey cards, torn out and returned from the *Craft Heritage Trails* guidebook, indicate that 96 percent of those who purchased the book also went on to buy local crafts. Roughly 11 percent of those visitors spent \$500 or more 62 percent spent between \$200 and \$400, and 22 percent spent less than \$100. Furthermore, lead partner HandMade in America has begun to examine the impact of what has been

called the “invisible industry” of craftspeople in the Blue Ridge region. In 2004, HandMade commissioned a study of the economic impacts of the creative economy on downtown Asheville, the main population center of the heritage area. The study found that the “creative class” (artists, educators, craftspeople, designers, and so on) occupied 28 percent of Asheville’s building space, representing a real estate value of \$61.7 million.¹⁵³ Although not all the members of the creative class are included in the craft heritage guidebooks or considered part of the heritage area, this study is a rare quantifiable demonstration of the economic power of the local craft industry, which may indicate the long-term viability of craft-related tourism.

The agri-tourism component of the heritage initiative has also been credited with boosting the local economy of western North Carolina, while preserving farming as an essential component of mountain life. As property values rise, more and more farmers, not just in North Carolina, but across the country, have increasingly subdivided their land and sold their property to developers. Yet some estimates say that the kind of “agri-tourism” promoted by the farm heritage guidebook could help local farmers to enhance their incomes by 10 to 25 percent above the money brought in by traditional production—a margin that could mean “the difference between selling the farm or continuing to work the land,” as an Asheville newspaper account put it.¹⁵⁴

Yet the Park Service admits that the “economic impacts of the trails on the local economy haven’t been fully measured.”¹⁵⁵ As crafts go, for example, it is unclear whether the creative economy in Asheville translates into a sustainable income stream for the entire heritage area, which includes many off-the-beaten-path places that might be less of a natural draw than Asheville. Agri-tourism is another possible weak link. There is

evidence that agricultural landowners in the region may not be as equipped as the Park Service, local arts groups, or the Cherokee nation to promote heritage tourism. Currently, most farming in western North Carolina is done part-time, with farmers often holding other jobs during the week and farming on the weekends, leaving little time for agri-tourism endeavors.

Methods of Dealing with Threatened Resources

Finally, national heritage areas have benefited when they institute viable methods of preserving or reusing threatened resources, whether it means adaptively using mills in the Blackstone River Valley or preserving Cherokee cultural traditions inside the Qualla Boundary. Publicizing threats gives heritage areas an interpretive engine by fostering a sense of nostalgia and pride, but it also motivates local residents to be concerned about saving their disappearing heritage. In western North Carolina, there is a sense that the region's agricultural history, manufacturing base, and mountain lifestyle are disappearing. "Crafts were just so economically viable for us," says Becky Anderson. "We saw 10 years ago that manufacturing wasn't going to be the answer for our economy. Everybody was so scared to face that reality."¹⁵⁶ In the face of these challenges, the partnership frameworks that have been established in the Blue Ridge heritage area, which involved dozens of communities, have resulted in numerous efforts to preserve cultural sites, crafts, and traditions. This has created a "master list for historic preservation projects, curriculum development support, and a who's who of authentic human resources for the region," according to the Park Service.¹⁵⁷

In Vonore, Tennessee, for example, the Cherokee nation is working with the staff

of the Fort Loudoun State Historic Area and the Sequoyah Birthplace Museum, as well as other heritage area partners, to reconstruct a historical Cherokee village to represent one that was destroyed by colonists in 1776. The first phase of the village involves the reconstruction of a Cherokee winter house using the traditional wattle-and-daub technique, with a roof made from tulip poplar bark. In addition, two recently planted gardens at Cherokee Heritage Trails sites recognize the symbiotic relationship that the Cherokee nation has long had with the land. A garden at the Sequoyah Birthplace Museum will contain traditional crops cultivated by the Cherokees over thousands of years, while a similar garden at the Junaluska Museum in Robbinsville, North Carolina, features native plants that have been used in Cherokee medicinal remedies. At the federal level, the National Park Service is working to revise interpretive signs at Cherokee sites on the Blue Ridge Parkway to better reflect Cherokee perspectives.¹⁵⁸

The heritage area's ability to respond to threats to agricultural sites, however, does not seem well developed. Farmers may need more incentives, such as conservation easements (in which landowners receive tax breaks or other benefits for agreeing to preserve their lands), to promote agricultural preservation within the heritage area.¹⁵⁹ To assist this process, HandMade in America has published a manual called *Agri-Cultural Tourism: Asset Building and Marketing*, but more work needs to be done.

Conclusion

The Blue Ridge National Heritage Area, designated in 2003, represents the culmination of several fruitful years of public-private partnerships, community outreach, and heritage preservation efforts. Although heritage preservation and partnerships had

occurred earlier in the region, it was not until an intense focus was placed on the goal of heritage area designation that great strides were made in community outreach, the publication of heritage-related materials, and in preservation efforts. Partners were identified early in the process, based on their pre-existing relationships with local communities, their fundraising abilities, and their commitment to the protection of western North Carolina's unique natural and cultural resources. By developing the four heritage trails guidebooks, the Blue Ridge Heritage Initiative successfully demonstrated its ability to identify the artists, craftspeople, storytellers, and other tradition-bearers in the region, solicit their input, and produce tangible products that identify and celebrate local traditions while encouraging tourism income for local communities. This multi-pronged effort is the fundamental underpinning of the heritage area.

The heritage area's primary strength may be that it is organized around the popular Blue Ridge Parkway, which may afford other sites in the heritage area a greater chance of being understood and explored by visitors. Millions of visitors have long recognized that the parkway is the centerpiece of a scenic and culturally rich region worthy of conservation and preservation, which local communities in the heritage area can now capitalize on.

In keeping with its purported mission to engage a broad spectrum of regional constituents, the heritage area should take care to not become overly reliant on two of its lead organizations: HandMade in America, with its emphasis on the region's craft heritage, and AdvantageWest, with its emphasis on marketing and tourism. Greater emphasis must be placed on reaching out to underrepresented communities, socioeconomic groups, and sources of heritage tourism income.

Furthermore, the heritage area has much work to do yet in branding its image and providing interpretation of the many sites it includes. If heritage area leaders succumb to political pressures to focus on serving visitors first, such as building new “destination centers” and kiosks that point people to hotels and tourist attractions, instead of on preserving local resources and heritage, the heritage area could risk undermining the very culture and places it was created to protect and celebrate.