

## CHAPTER V CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR APPALACHIAN HERITAGE AREAS

### Introduction

National heritage areas provide an increasingly popular framework within which to pursue natural resource conservation, historic preservation, public-private partnerships, and community engagement. My research shows that national heritage areas have been able to secure millions of dollars in funding, from both public and private sources, for preservation and interpretation, while attracting thousands of visitors and volunteers. Public officials support heritage areas because they can champion projects that benefit their constituents (while boosting their own political capital), but people also support heritage areas because of their ability to secure funding, raise awareness, and protect cultural heritage. As of 2005, with 27 nationally designated heritage areas, dozens more local, state, and regional heritage efforts, and additional heritage areas proposed for consideration by Congress each year, the heritage area concept is increasingly gaining currency among citizens, government leaders and elected officials, and business communities. But my research also indicates that it is unclear whether all this attention and considerable federal funding is adequate to ensure that national heritage areas can or should be self-sustaining over the long term.

The Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor, established in 1986, has been hailed as a successful heritage area, in terms of creating working partnerships, clearly defining interpretive themes, and establishing a recognizable identity in a

formerly polluted and underdeveloped watershed. As summarized in the introductory chapter of this thesis, the Blackstone Valley was recently the focus of an intensive sustainability study, to analyze the factors that contribute to the heritage area's success, as well as those areas that need further study and work. The Blackstone Valley study, therefore, was a useful "control" against which one could test the likely viability of new or proposed heritage areas.

As case studies to compare to more established areas such as the Blackstone River Valley, this thesis examined two relatively new heritage areas, the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area, first organized in 1997 and designated by Congress in 2003, and the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area, a regional heritage effort that began in 1999. These two regions have many elements in common, such as the natural beauty of the Appalachian Mountains and a strong emphasis on traditional ways of life, whether expressed through music and crafts or through farming and forestry. A primary supposition underlying this thesis was that the Appalachian people were fiercely proud of and committed to preserving their heritage. Research for this thesis bears this out. Both the Blue Ridge and Appalachian Forest heritage areas came about after years of planning, preservation work, and partnership. Contrary to popular belief, Appalachian people are well aware of the threats facing their land and heritage, how development and technological changes are affecting their way of life, and steps they can take to preserve their culture and traditions.

But these two heritage areas also have important differences, in terms of interpretive themes, sites that are included, and other factors. Based on the examination of these two heritage areas and a comparison against the conclusions of the Blackstone

River Valley sustainability study, I have found that the primary factors for heritage area success include a clearly defined regional network of sites and circulation routes, a well-developed framework for partnership and preservation, and the continued expression of cultural traditions. My research did not demonstrate, however, that a sustainable income stream from heritage tourism was critical to the success of a heritage area. I have found, however, that funding a heritage area is one of the least-studied and -understood aspects of heritage area planning, and that more research is needed to determine how funding from both public and private sources affects heritage area planning, project implementation, and ultimate success.

#### Primary Factors for Heritage Area Success

Although my research showed that some heritage areas, such as Blackstone River Valley, are catalysts for the conservation of natural and historic sites, an important goal in its own right, national heritage areas are predicated on the belief that people will be interested in visiting and returning to these sites. Therefore, interpretation, circulation and accessibility, and branding are significant organizational factors in heritage area planning. Both the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor and the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area are organized around a clearly defined regional network of related natural and cultural sites. The Blackstone River, for one, is an obvious unifying feature that provides context and organization for the various historic sites around it. Similarly, the immensely popular Blue Ridge Parkway is the natural focal point for the myriad sites located in the Blue Ridge heritage area.

Furthermore, the Blackstone Valley corridor is book-ended by two cities, and the

Blue Ridge heritage area is headquartered in the city of Asheville, the de-facto capital of North Carolina's mountain region. By contrast, the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area lacks a clearly defined circulation route, and the only sizable population center, Cumberland, Maryland, is located in the far northern end of the heritage area. Without an easily identifiable circulation route and recognizable branding through signs and travel brochures, it might be difficult for people to visit various sites in the heritage area and therefore build up public support for heritage area goals and objectives. It is usually easier to garner support for preservation and interpretation when people to care about or visit these sites. Furthermore, people will naturally visit sites that are easy to reach. Without the existence of a population center or a clearly defined circulation route from which to draw visitors, a heritage area is little more than a nice idea. Therefore, a well-organized regional network of sites, connected by a clear circulation route, is a primary factor for the success of heritage areas. To overcome this deficit, the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area will have to do a better job of developing a circulation route through the heritage area that is clearly identified through maps, signs, and possibly other means such as audio tapes that people could play in their cars as they tour the area.

All national heritage areas are developed through partnerships between the National Park Service, local governments, private organizations, and community leaders. My research found that this partnership mechanism should be sophisticated and organized enough to implement a management plan for a heritage area, while being able to respond to threats to resources, lack of participation, or other exigencies that arise in a heritage area. The Blackstone River Valley sustainability study affirms this conclusion, stating that a platform for civic engagement, a management entity that inspires

collaboration toward preservation and other goals, and a commitment to a public, participatory process are all factors that have contributed to the corridor's success in the last two decades.

Like the Blackstone River Valley, communities throughout the Blue Ridge region had set the stage for heritage planning and partnerships for years through active community groups and numerous nonprofit organizations. Leading organizations such as the North Carolina Arts Council, HandMade in America, and the Eastern Band of the Cherokee all had experience working with communities on arts, crafts, and heritage education projects prior to federal designation of the heritage area. My research showed that numerous preservation and interpretation projects have been realized in the region, which indicates a high likelihood that such efforts will continue to be successful.

Although partnerships form the basis for the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area as well, these collaborative efforts and the processes for civic engagement are less developed, and therefore the heritage area seems to have made less progress toward its goals. But the leadership of preexisting and well-established entities such as the Preservation Alliance of West Virginia and the Canaan Valley Institute, as well as the partners' commitment to regular meetings and community outreach, bodes well for future preservation efforts.

Furthermore, the experiences of the Blackstone River Valley, Blue Ridge, and Appalachian Forest heritage areas all point to the continued expression of cultural traditions as a primary factor for heritage area success. Visitors go to heritage areas to understand and connect with their past, and modern-day expressions of those traditions, whether they include folk arts in the Blackstone Valley, bluegrass music in the Blue

Ridge, or sustainable forestry in the Appalachian Forest, can be important and engaging draws for visitors. Just as having strong connections between heritage area sites is important, so is creating a strong visual and emotional connection between the historic sites preserved within a heritage area and the traditions they embody. The ongoing celebration of cultural traditions makes that connection for participants, residents, and visitors.

As a final note, my research indicated that heritage areas are predicated on the idea that associating a group of related sites provides more benefits to those sites, in terms of tourism, preservation, and funding, than those sites might receive on their own. It is possible, however, that the existence of many parks, historic sites, and heritage-related shops in a single area can lead to repetitiveness or a dilution of message that might turn off potential visitors.

#### Secondary Factors for Heritage Area Success

When it comes to a sustainable income stream from heritage tourism, my research was not able to prove that heritage areas depend on this for survival, even though heritage tourism is often a stated goal of heritage area planning. The Blackstone Valley sustainability study did point to the uncertainty of annual funding allocations as a source of concern in the heritage corridor, and that more could be done to boost the local economy, but it did not point to heritage tourism income as a primary factor in the heritage corridor's success over the years. In the Blue Ridge, lead partner HandMade in America has begun to examine the economic impacts of heritage tourism on the region and specifically the city of Asheville, but again it does not appear that income from

heritage tourism has played a strong role in the success of the heritage area thus far. Similarly, the Appalachian Forest heritage area has not yet done enough work to determine how best to draw in heritage tourism and how to capitalize on the income that tourism might bring in.

Yet my research indicates that funding is a major source of concern for national heritage areas, including the Blackstone River Valley, the Blue Ridge, and the Appalachian Forest. More than heritage tourism dollars, heritage areas need to rely on annual federal funding, which is in turn leveraged to attract the millions of dollars in state, local, and private investment that have helped heritage areas to achieve their goals.

Although heritage areas do receive federal funding, it is dependent on congressional appropriations and can vary widely year to year. Private funding sources can also fluctuate according to economic factors. The sustainability study for the Blackstone River Valley, for example, notes that a lack of a secure and reliable funding base is of greatest concern in the heritage area. With this in mind, one aspect of heritage area development that requires greater study is how various funding sources, including heritage tourism, translate into heritage area development and sustainability.

Although localized economic studies helped inform the basis of planning efforts in the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area and the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area, they mainly focused on how heritage tourism creates jobs within a heritage area and boosts the local economy. For the purposes of assisting in the creation of a sustainable income base for heritage areas, further research must be done on how heritage areas can generate income for program implementation, whether from tourism or other sources, and how that money translates into achieving heritage area goals. Without a well-defined construct

for funding generation and a matrix for how that funding will be disseminated for heritage area projects, heritage areas run the risk of producing projects on a piecemeal or “catch as catch can” basis, without the benefit of long-term planning.

One opportunity is presented by the Money Generation Model, developed by Michigan State University, which has been used by the National Park Service as a first step toward measuring the impact of tourism on national park units. In one phase of the model, researchers gathered data from visitor surveys at six national heritage areas to determine tourism spending in the surrounding regions. Other heritage areas have been encouraged to participate in this data gathering exercise, which could be an important source of information going forward.<sup>202</sup>

#### Opportunities for Further Research

In addition to economic studies, research opportunities include a compilation of statistics on income from heritage tourism within a cross-section of heritage areas, including visits to heritage area sites, shopping for heritage-related goods, and participation in and attendance to events like festivals and reenactments. An investigation of the nexus between the recipients of heritage tourism dollars and participation in heritage area partnership activities would also be informative. A key question that could be investigated is the extent to which entities that benefit from tourism to a heritage area then return the investment by funding preservation, interpretation, and planning projects that would contribute to the long-term success of that heritage area. This ties into the need for heritage area leaders to reach out to a wide

cross-section of potential partners in the region, to encourage their involvement and commitment to the region.

Another rewarding avenue of research would be to conduct a survey of how aware residents and visitors are about the sites within a given heritage area, and how that awareness relates to both the commonalities and the differences between specific sites. Do heritage areas lead to a mentality of “if you’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all”? Such a survey would determine how well branding messages come across to visitors, and whether visitors understand the distinctions between sites within a heritage area. One could also investigate whether the existence of several heritage areas in a region can saturate and overwhelm the base of potential visitors and confuse the interpretive message.

Finally, my research indicates that heritage areas are still a relatively new construct for conservation and preservation, relying on public-private partnerships and volunteer efforts to achieve conservation and preservation goals. Heritage areas provide a sharp contrast to the days when national parks and forests were purchased outright by the federal government or claimed through eminent domain. With this in mind, one research question worth investigating is the extent to which heritage areas actually result in land and resource conservation and careful land-use by localities within a heritage area. Anecdotal evidence suggests that more attention is focused on adaptively using historic sites and highlighting heritage-related tourism activities like shopping and festivals. Only one heritage area management entity, the Shenandoah Valley Battlefields National Historic District, is authorized to purchase and acquire land. A study of how land acquisition and conservation are accomplished in heritage areas, and a comparison with

areas such as the Shenandoah Valley Battlefields National Historic District that are focused on land acquisition, could inform current and future heritage area proposals. This information could also help expand the reach of potential partners to include more land trusts and other land-acquisition entities.

### Conclusion

Because they represent fairly new concepts, national heritage areas, in many ways, can still be considered an “experiment” in the conservation and preservation of large, lived-in landscapes, albeit one that has engendered a broad and diverse array of partnership efforts, preservation initiatives, and visitor activities. At the Blackstone River Valley, as the sustainability study states, the development of a “partnership culture” is leading to conservation of an important story and unique resources. “It has everything to do with people and connecting them to heritage and place and kindling a sense of stewardship,” the report states. “In this process, a shared heritage becomes a bridge between past, present, and future.”<sup>203</sup>

In doing research for this thesis, I found that national heritage areas are dependent on the existence of active partnerships among national, state, local, and private entities that are committed to working together to achieve a range of goals related to preservation, interpretation, and heritage tourism. But careful planning and preparation do not always translate into a successful heritage area. Inconsistent and unreliable funding sources, and a lack of understanding of how heritage tourism income translates into future heritage area preservation and support, are liabilities for heritage area success.

Going forward, the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area and the Appalachian

Forest Heritage Area would do well to follow the model set by the Blackstone River Valley, which has established an active partnership framework, continually sought new partners and encouraged public involvement, worked to clearly define and unify sites in the heritage area through circulation routes, branding, and interpretive materials, and, finally, encouraged the continuation of the cultural traditions that led to the establishment of these historic areas so long ago. The Appalachian region has an abundance of significant natural and cultural sites, committed partners, and long-held cultural traditions. Once funding sources are identified and leveraged in such a way that long-term planning and project implementation can occur, both the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area and the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area stand a good chance of success, drawing visitors and preserving cultural heritage for many years to come.