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Nora J. Mitchell
November 28, 2016

Interview conducted by Antionette Condo
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My Narrative
The Administrative History of the National Heritage Areas Coordinating Office

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How did you become interested in heritage areas? From very early in my career, I have been interested in landscape conservation and over the years that has taken on different meanings and operated at different scales. In 1979, I began work at the NPS North Atlantic Regional Office in Boston (which was later combined with the Mid-Atlantic Region to become the Northeast Region). I worked first in the Science Office and then in the Resource Management Program. Thus, I started in the natural resource field and got into cultural heritage through a NPS fellowship in England early in my career.

I had gotten to know British colleagues, in particular, at the Countryside Commission for England and Wales, one of our partners in the U.S./U.K. Countryside Stewardship Exchange. After learning about the perspective on landscapes in the U.K., I was convinced that it would be useful to spend a fellowship in England. Fortunately, I was able to obtain sponsorship from the NPS to review landscape programs in England with the intent of bringing new perspectives and program development ideas on landscape conservation back to the U.S. In the fall of 1988, I spent four months in England on a DeWitt Wallace Fellowship in Historic Preservation supported by the NPS Horace M. Albright Employee Development Fund and had the opportunity to visit a number of their national parks, national trust properties, and a variety of other landscapes, and also interviewed numerous people about their work on landscape conservation.

This 4-month fellowship early in my career had an outsized influence on my perspective and ideas about working on landscape conservation at a large scale and addressing natural and cultural heritage as well as community vitality. I have continued to work on various aspects of this field over the rest of my career and continue to do so now. When I came back from my fellowship in England, I convinced the North Atlantic Region to establish a cultural landscape program and in 1990, I became director of this new program. Dwight Pitcaithley was chief historian in the Northeast in the late 1980s and early 1990s and he strongly supported the idea of creating a cultural landscape program and was extremely helpful in making the case for this regional program. In 1992, I worked with the region and the Olmsted National Historic Site to create the Olmsted Center for Landscape Preservation and after a couple of years, the regional program and the Center were merged under the name of the Olmsted Center, and I became the founding director. The Olmsted Center is still in operation as a technical program office of the NPS conducting research and providing advice to park and regional management on cultural landscape conservation.

These were early days for cultural landscapes both in concept and in practice. When the Northeast Region created my position in cultural landscapes there were two positions in the Washington Office at the time; Lauren Meier who was working with the National Register and Secretary of the Interior's Guidelines, and Bob Page who was head of the park cultural landscapes program working on national policies and with the national parks across the country. Cathy Gilbert in the Pacific West Region was, at that time, the sole regional historical landscape architect. Bob's boss was Randy Biallis, and Hugh Miller was also there. In the late 1980s and into early 1990s, Hugh was working with Robert Melnick (from the University of Oregon) on rural vernacular landscapes. The person who was skeptical about the concept of cultural landscapes was Jerry Rogers who was then Associate Director, Cultural Resources. So, this new

cultural landscape program was pretty small at that time, but it was also a time of increasing recognition and interest in cultural landscapes both within but also outside the NPS.

Cultural landscapes were, in some ways, a precursor to heritage areas because it's really about scale, isn't it? The term, *cultural landscape*, is useful for a small garden all the way up to the Hudson Valley. When the recognition of landscapes as heritage began, the language was open and allowed some flexibility in definition, which I think was a big advantage for all of us trying to frame up these ideas and definitions. At that time, those framing the cultural landscape program and the national heritage program were actively seeking ideas and approaches from outside the agency and international models and experience.

In 1994 when you attended the heritage partnerships rally organized by the National Coalition for Heritage Areas held at Georgetown University conference center you were listed as Manager, Cultural Landscape Program. How did your program differ from or support the NPS work with National Heritage Areas supervised by Sam Stokes? At this time, we were working on setting up the framework for this new cultural landscape program. For example, we needed to get cultural landscapes into NPS 28 (NPS cultural resource policy) and figure out how to inventory these resources. There was a lot of basic program building work to be done. We were also doing projects, such as cultural landscapes reports, which include the landscape's history and change over time and also management planning for landscapes. Bob Page and I wrote an article in 1993 for *The Forum* (publication of the National Trust) about the cultural landscape program and about working on preservation of cultural landscapes. Interestingly at about the same time, in 1992, the World Heritage Committee recognized cultural landscapes as eligible for the World Heritage List. There was a lot of momentum nationally and internationally towards recognizing this type of resource.

In July 2002 you attended the East Goes West training workshop hosted by the NPS Intermountain Regional Office. You were one of the several participants from the Northeast Region. Joe DiBello, Peter Samuel, Linda Seifert, Peggy Albee, and Jim O'Connell also attended. What were your duties in the Northeast Region related to heritage areas at that time?: In 1998, I became the founding director of NPS Conservation Study Institute (CSI) (now the Stewardship Institute), based at Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller NHP. The mission of the Institute was to enhance the leadership and partnership capacity of the NPS for parks and for larger landscapes and to learn about successful community-based approaches to conservation. For example, the Conservation Study Institute was asked by Warren Brown, the head of NPS Planning, to take a look at some of the recent partnership areas established by Congress including legislation for partnership parks and national heritage areas. Some of these parks were based on NPS special area studies or reports and some were modeled after legislation for other areas. Warren wanted to learn about the effectiveness of these partnership arrangements on the ground. This question from the NPS Planning Office brought the Institute into working on partnership parks and national heritage areas to reflect on what was working and understand why it was working well and how this could be improved. To do this, we held two national workshops and, a number of national heritage area professionals participated including the superintendent of Cane River Creole National Historical Park and the executive director of Cane River National Heritage Area who were working very closely together. Many of the workshop participants came as teams so that the partners and the NPS staff could each reflect on

their perspective and learn from their shared experiences in strongly embedded partnerships. We learned a lot about effective partnerships and how to enhance collaborative leadership and published two Institute reports in 2001 and 2003

In 2003, while you were Director of the Conservation Study Institute you gave a presentation at an international partnership workshop in Pittsburg on international exchanges. What did you see as important about international relationships for National Heritage Areas?: While working in the North Atlantic Region in the late 1970s and early 1980s, I met several British colleagues through a North Atlantic Region partnership initiative on international exchange, the U.S.- U.K. Countryside Stewardship Exchange. The purpose of this program was to learn innovative approaches to working with communities to address challenging issues on a larger landscape scale. We didn't call this work heritage areas, we called it landscape conservation stewardship, but it had many similarities.

This U.S./U.K. professional exchange program was directed at practical and challenging problem-solving in collaboration with communities. To conduct this program, we sent out a request for proposals to communities in the Northeast asking if they were interested in having an international team come to their communities. We had a tremendous response from communities that submitted proposals asking for advice on a particularly challenging landscape conservation issue. We would then field a team of four U.S. and four U.K. professionals knowledgeable about this challenge; this team of eight would spend a week with the communities and at the end of that week, they offered their best advice. We sponsored the first one in 1987, then two years later, the U.K. sponsored the program in their communities. We ran the program every other year for five or six years.

Along with all participants in the exchange, I learned a lot and was greatly influenced by the people I met over the years we conducted this international exchange. As part of the partnership that conducted this international exchange program, I was fortunate to work with an organization called the Quebec Labrador Foundation (QLF)/Atlantic Center for the Environment. They are still a partner with the NPS on landscape conservation. This U.S.- U.K. exchange greatly benefited from their experience with international projects and their professional contacts. This exchange is one example of a program designed to learn from other countries in order to inform strategies to address particularly challenging issues facing the NPS and strategies for large scale conservation, in particular. The national heritage areas benefitted from exchange with France and other countries with similar experience with regional landscape approaches.

What effect did the Partnership Committee of the NPS Advisory Board and its report, *Charting a Future for National Heritage Areas*, have on NPS and on the Congress?:

The report of the Advisory Board, *Charting a Future for National Heritage Areas*, published in 2006, consolidated what had been learned from the experience with national heritage areas and what remained as challenges and opportunities; based on this assessment, the Advisory Board developed a list of recommendations. For example, the Board noted that there were a number of challenges that could be addressed if the heritage areas were officially part of the national park system. This would, for example, help to identify consistent funding rather than on a year-to-year basis. The Advisory Board report made a good case for having program legislation. And while Brenda (Barrett) and others worked to advance program legislation for national heritage

areas a number of times, this was not successful. Even so, this report was an important message to the NPS from the Advisory Board and represented the perspective that it would be mutually advantageous if heritage areas were officially recognized as an important and integral part of the national park system.

What were some early challenges NPS faced in trying to form a standardized National Heritage Areas System?: The challenge has been for the NPS to embrace a conservation model other than the national park model and I think this continues to be a challenge. This reluctance was particularly strong when heritage areas first emerged, because they were very different from the park model and this model placed the NPS in a different role. The NPS had to learn different skills and learn how to be effective in this partnership role.

The NPS does very well in places that don't rely on economic activity. However, in living landscapes, where people continue to live and work the land, conservation includes a focus on community economic vitality alongside preservation and education. This has been a strength of the heritage area approach. Another strength has been developing a model of place-based governance that includes many partners such as the NPS, communities, government, and organizations around the table. Heritage areas are a different model than most national parks where generally the NPS is primarily responsible for management. The heritage area approach was able to encompass living landscapes in a very effective way. Prior to heritage areas, there was a gap in the conservation strategy in the U.S., particularly, for living landscapes. The heritage areas stepped up to address that type of landscape where it was hard to accomplish conservation through a park model. There are a few partnership parks that have some similarities to heritage areas where the NPS works with local organizations on a board, such as Ebey's Landing National Historical Reserve. There are some successful stories of parks on living landscapes, but the heritage areas model generally responds to the conservation strategy far more effectively.

The question of standardization is relative. For example, if you look at the parks, there are standards for parks, but this might not be apparent when you look at the diversity in the system. Even though parks are standardized, there is still flexibility in order to respond to the character and needs of a particular place. Since there is legislation for every park this provides that flexibility while the policies ensure consistency. I would envision something like that for heritage areas. It would be defined as a system, like the parks are part of a system, but to make them effective, you would have some flexibility in terms of how each one was set up. You want to have some sort of management entity because this is the key ingredient in the success, as demonstrated through evaluations. Learning from the experience to date should help inform the parameters for the system. This is what we (at the Conservation Study Institute) were trying to do with the evaluations. Identifying and incorporating the key ingredients would ensure credibility and would also establish a high bar to maintain the quality of nominations but also have some flexibility. I think the park system is a good example of how that can work. If you read the legislation for various parks, they couldn't be more diverse yet there are common elements and also management policies for the system. Some elements are modified to respond to the history of that place: for example, in some parks hunting is allowed, whereas others do not; some have a partner that has been working with the area for many years and they want to

recognize that and keep them involved, so they'll be mentioned in the legislation. You would want to have this type of leeway with heritage areas, just as we have in national parks.

Have you seen a change in attitude in NPS toward heritage areas from 1994 to 2015?: The heritage areas were much more effective with Congress than they were with the NPS. That is why Deny Galvin's interest and support for heritage areas has been very important because Deny was, and is, very well respected in the organization. Consequently, the NPS perspective on heritage areas has changed a lot over time, but there is still some skepticism. It is important to view heritage areas as part of a larger set of conservation approaches that can be effective in different situations. I think this has been increasingly recognized and understood within the NPS over time, particularly now with the NPS interest in *scaling up*.

What does the NPS have to know about a heritage area to be useful to it?: National heritage areas are heritage-based conservation that extends over a region and the strategies are strongly linked to education and interpretation and to vitality for communities that is compatible with, and often dependent on, heritage conservation. National heritage areas are congressionally designated and that's a high bar in terms of places and stories important to the nation. The Institute (CSI) conducted evaluations of three national heritage areas and each of these studies show that being nationally designated and being associated with the NPS were important assets for giving the effort credibility, locally, regionally, and nationally. This is very important when you are putting together a conservation strategy. You need to demonstrate that you are a creditable organization, that the partnerships across the region are effective, and that your goals are worthwhile and supported by organizations, government and communities within the heritage area. In other words, a set of factors were identified in the evaluations that were key to moving the conservation strategies forward, and also helped the heritage area continue to adapt and mature over time to become increasingly effective. Another important element these three evaluations revealed was that every heritage area legislation identified a management entity and that when used effectively, which these three areas did, this entity functioned as a hub that; provided a trusted framework to engage local people and communities, identified and engaged the players across the region in developing a management plan, figured out what pieces of the plan could be jump started for early implementation, and be able to successfully leverage volunteers and financial resources. We began calling this *partnership networks* and the management entity was the hub of this network. Today, there is an extensive literature on partnership networks that demonstrates when you move to conservation on a large landscape scale you have to change the way you do business to be effective. The heritage areas figured this out and organized their outreach, planning, decision making, and fund raising through this network.

The Blackstone is a good example. Twenty-four cities and towns along a 50 mile stretch of river. I don't know how many non-profits they had in that region but there were many, each with its own purpose and operating on its own. Many were small organizations with little capacity to have substantial impact on the larger region. The heritage area management entity created a table where they could meet and start talking to each other on an on-going basis and they realized that they were stronger together and could have more impact together; achieving their own goals but also achieving larger regional goals identified in the heritage area management plan. When people figured that out, it transformed the way they were doing their work locally

and regionally. We saw some organizations that realigned their organization's goals to better align with the management plan and goals of the region. They were leveraging their impact. For small organizations it's a big plus to be able to join a partnership team for the heritage area and get more work done and raise money more effectively. That is what became so powerful with the heritage areas. People took a look at the work getting done for the region and said, there's something going on there. That is why heritage area became a sought-after designation. It created energy. It created impacts. It got people engaged. It aligned all these organizations towards shared goals for the region described in the management plan.

I can't tell you the number of times I listened to organizations in the Blackstone share how proud they were that they had been able to work with the historical society if they were the Audubon Society, for example. They found each other through the heritage area partnership network and were pleased with what they were able to do as a result of their enhanced connections across the region. We started thinking, there's something going on here that's very important for conservation. Because, at that point, people increasingly began talking about working at a landscape scale. A scale larger than individual parks and larger than individual communities.

Consequently, it is important that the NPS understand how heritage areas operate. Because of the partnership network concept, usually their staff is relatively small. I think that park management could learn a lot from the heritage areas particularly about working with others across a large region. That is another reason we tried to distill the lessons we learned from the research and evaluations. Most of heritage area work is conducted with partners through the partnership network. The NPS can continue to learn how to participate effectively as a partner and also learn how a partnership network works and how to sustain these collaborative efforts over time. That is what I would recommend. It would be worthwhile to take a hard look at how heritage areas are making decisions, how they are pulling people in and engaging them and understand the role of the park and how the NPS can be helpful in advancing joint efforts. This approach could apply to planning, or implementation of a project, or engaging the public. It could be offering a venue or including them in a brochure. I think NPS would benefit from listening and learning how heritage areas operate, figure out how the model works, how the NPS can add value, and how a similar approach could be adapted and applied to management of some national parks in the context of their regional landscapes.

What research questions would aid heritage areas to meet their goals?: The Conservation Study Institute began conducting research on heritage areas at the request of the Blackstone National Heritage Area as part of their strategic planning process. These evaluations were valued by this and other heritage areas because this research offered a chance for them to reflect on their approach, accomplishments and challenges. The research process probed for insights to identify the key ingredients that make a successful heritage area. We came up with what we thought was a list of some of those elements, e.g., the congressionally designated national recognition was a big asset and the management entity serving as a network hub. Learning what makes them work well is very useful to managers of existing areas and for starting new ones.

What do you suggest as appropriate criteria to measure heritage area success?: Another challenge for evaluations is to figure out how to document program impact. It was, of course, a

challenge to get agreement on what to measure to document impact. We analyzed leverage of dollars and volunteer hours and demonstrated impressive numbers.

In addition to documenting impacts of the heritage area, we also wanted to learn about successful strategies and ways of organizing the program. I hope that is the case with future research. With evaluation research, you are trying to put some information in the hands of the people who are doing the management and helping them to become increasingly effective. It was a pleasure working with the whole team of heritage area managers who worked with us (on the evaluations) and learning with them about their programs and how to improve them.

What we learned from the three evaluations was that the partnership networks across the region are critical to delivering the outcomes, and therefore, it was important to learn what improves these partnership networks and sustains them over time, and to be able to document the impact they have on the goals in the heritage area management plan. We made substantial progress, but it is also important to continue to refresh and improve the approach and continue to monitor both the networks and the impacts. As people try new things, and these initiatives are working, it is important to keep track of what people are finding is effective. Of course, this is likely to change over time so it would be useful to have a way to continue to probe both of those questions more consistently.

I haven't looked very closely at the heritage area evaluations that were done after the first three conducted by the Institute. However, I understand that the subsequent evaluations used a similar research framework. If so, someone can come back in again and use that framework and see what has changed and see what has been learned since the first studies.

People don't always think about research for management improvement, but it is very helpful. We have tried to distill what we have learned from the heritage area evaluations that the Institute did in a couple of papers and create a framework that could be used by future research.

The most important finding from my point of view was what we learned about governance by partnership network. We are used to having a park with a superintendent and a staff whereas the governance for heritage areas is based on having a non-hierarchical management entity, an organization made up of representatives from different organizations in the region, figuring out how to plan and get work done together. Importantly, this management entity's primary purpose is to be a convener and facilitate a shared vision and coordinated action rather than being another organization with its own mission and plan. Understanding this type of governance is very relevant to heritage areas but also to parks who are interested in working more effectively across their larger region. A lot of the lessons that came out of the heritage areas research can be useful to park managers.

Can you describe any NPS policies or processes you thought particularly helpful to the success of heritage areas?: In the evaluations of national heritage areas, the Institute identified the value of a federal agency being involved. The NPS as a partner in each heritage area added value by association and also seemed to contribute to their staying power over time. We have seen that in other settings, not only with the heritage areas. For example, non-profits often struggle from year to year because their finances go up and down. And while that is also true for

federal agencies there is usually an authorization for funding included in the designation and this is generally allocated annually by Congress. In addition to funding, the professional capacity that federal agencies can provide can be very helpful to sustain these efforts over time. At the Institute we did a lot of work with partners. And one of the advantages was some years we could find funding within the federal government for joint projects and other years our partners could find funding in the non-profit world. This kind of flexibility through public and private partnerships gives more sustainability over time both with funding and in expertise.

Association with the NPS brand is also very important to national heritage areas. There has always been a debate on how and when and where to use the NPS arrowhead, and who can use it. It is very important to heritage areas to have the association with this national organization that has such a good reputation. There has been progress on figuring out how to co-brand.

The authority and use of cooperative agreements are another important area of policy. While this works reasonably well, this certainly can be improved. Another opportunity is to open NPS professional development programs to staff of heritage areas and vice versa.

I don't know if the NPS Partnership Council still exists, but having some kind of regular, official interaction between the NPS and the National Heritage Areas, perhaps through the Alliance of National Heritage Areas. This type of opportunity for on-going dialogue can help to make sure that policies and programs are working as intended and to continually consider how to improve these for mutual benefit. I think this would be helpful to track, over time, where the barriers are and what can be improved.

Do National Heritage Areas support the mission of the NPS?: Heritage areas came along at an important time when there were shifts in conservation that recognized the need to work on large landscapes and the NPS was not sure of how to approach living landscapes or how to scale up. As new models were sought, here is this group of heritage areas that are already working at a regional landscape scale and being quite effective in doing it. They created their own momentum, experimented with new approaches, and then they created their own alliance to share experiences and learn from each other. You not only had networks of communities, organizations, and government working together in landscape regions, you had this national group sharing success stories and skills, techniques, and experiences. I think this alliance continued to feed their learning curve and continued to improve their effectiveness.

A lot of success is timing. When I first started working in the NPS there was a report that came out, something like, *Federal Lands and Their Neighbors*, and then there was another report about the State of the Parks. Both of these publications documented that a lot of the threats to national parks were coming from outside the parks. In response, there was a shift from thinking that just managing the parks was enough to the realization that effective management required working with others outside the park boundaries as well. Even so, it took a while for that idea to be embraced by the NPS and then this idea required new strategies.

National Heritage Areas take the NPS into places where they wouldn't traditionally be involved, and this presents a range of good opportunities for the agency. Heritage areas are another conservation tool, like the National Register or National Landmarks, to protect places that are

deemed to be nationally important. Otherwise, either these significant places would not get the attention and would probably suffer some loss as a result, or the NPS would try to manage some of these larger lived-in landscapes, and I think this would be very challenging without a partnership approach. Heritage areas are also an asset to the national park system because they are nationally important places, e.g., Hudson River valley. It's hard to imagine that this and other regional landscapes represented by heritage areas are not of high value to the nation.

There is also a tremendous amount of education and interpretation work that goes on in heritage areas and this is very compatible and supportive of the NPS mission. In those heritage areas that have a national park either in the heritage area or near it, there is a tremendous opportunity to coordinate and leverage the storytelling and reach a much broader set of communities and school systems. All of this supports and is closely aligned with the mission of the NPS.

In addition, in the three heritage areas the Institute looked at, people in those communities are very happy to have a heritage area as this adds to quality of life in many ways. So, there is a lot of public support for heritage areas, and for conservation and interpretation of these places. Being associated with this type of conservation and the good will it generates is another benefit to the NPS.

Consequently, to maximize these benefits, it's very important for the NPS to look at the heritage areas; what they have accomplished, and how they can be improved. It would be good to see this as a much stronger partnership. Ideally, the NPS would see the benefits of heritage areas and figure out ways to reduce barriers so the heritage areas can become increasingly effective in their work through a NPS partnership. Figuring out that relationship through program legislation or some other kinds of agreement remains important. The heritage area model is out there on the landscape and it's working in a lot of places and so it would be good for these programs to be sustained and encouraged. The NPS is in a position to be helpful in a variety of ways.

It is also important to remember that change takes a long time, and it's usually not just one tipping point, but several. You build up to change and then perspectives start to shift. Heritage areas have been learning about conservation and community engagement working across large landscapes and this work and lessons learned is very relevant for the scaling up the NPS is undertaking. Conservation, education, and learning offers heritage areas and the NPS a lot of mutual benefit; both parties gain, so it will be very important to continue to explore and find ways to capitalize on mutual benefits.