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Fran Mainella
June 29, 2016

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My Narrative
The Administrative History of the National Heritage Areas Coordinating Office

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Interview conducted and transcribed by
Antoinette J. Condo

This transcript was reviewed by Fran Mainella

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I've always thought that Heritage Areas are one of the great examples of partnership, working together, and community building. I visited quite a few of the National Heritage Areas during my time as Director. The President and I focused on partnerships. That and the backlog were two of our key focal points. I was confirmed in July 2001, just before 9/11, and I became the first Director with an explosive's expert on staff. A lot of focus went into security during my time as well. But partnerships and maintenance backlog were such an important area for us, and the heritage areas were an example.

NHA benefit to NPS: A benefit to NPS was that we didn't own the heritage areas, but they partnered up and they trigger such a large volunteer effort that a lot of times the heritage areas were able to bring community not only to the heritage areas but to parks themselves. That meant more volunteers, more help for maintenance backlog through volunteer efforts. Volunteerism is all part of that partnership effort. We worked hard at trying to increase that. They were able to handle their own maintenance issues. They didn't have to come into the park numbers of backlog, and they helped us with the overall awareness.

The more we can improve heritage areas' visibility and what role they play in building community and also, not necessarily having to be in ownership by government we make them very desirable. This is in addition to the history and resources they protect and interpret. We certainly gave money to the heritage areas but nothing to the level of parks.

On my visits to the heritage areas, I felt that absolutely they were protecting important historical resources. I felt they would not only protect them but share them through having access to certain places that other folks would not necessarily get access to unless it was in that heritage area. So, I think they were very critical in the historical preservation effort.

The National Heritage Areas absolutely support the mission of the NPS. They may not be able to do every aspect of it, but they are a great compliment to what is going on in the national parks. To me it is a great partnership with the national parks.

Program legislation: Congress has passed the ability for these to be created just as we do a national park unit, a one-by-one bases. I assume because government doesn't like to levy rules and regulations on private lands that may have played a factor (why program legislation has not been enacted).

Funding: We continue to need to find a way to compliment the private sector funding that comes into heritage areas. Heritage areas don't have to be solely supported by federal funds like the parks. Partnerships like heritage areas address the fact that government doesn't need to own everything. That has been an important piece at least under the Bush Administration.

I think it is important that we maintain the ability to form these heritage areas and it would also be good to have within the legislation expectation that NPS would try to help financially as possible. Beyond that it is probably going to be a difficult road because even for our national park units it's hard to get any kind of lock in even though the number of parks is increasing.

Looking at the current NPS budget I don't know if it is equal to supporting the over 22 new park units which have been designated since my time as Director.

Normally they looked at our (NPS) budget as a total capacity and there was not separate funding just for heritage areas. There was no source of revenue that comes in earmarked for heritage areas. It means that if you do take money to fund heritage areas it may be less for the parks. It doesn't always mean that, but it did not have a unique funding source like Land and Water Conservation which comes from a source separate from the tax dollars that pay for the national parks. But coming from general funding it is shared dollars which means money going into a heritage area could have been money going to a national park.

We all believe in them so we're willing to take it out of the general funding dollars. What we tried to do in my administration was when we brought new parks into the system, we tried to bring an endowment, so it didn't take away from sites already in the NPS. The funding for heritage areas is primarily coming from themselves and the good part of that is that it is not government regulated. You have to have a master plan so can't go off on too far a tangent, but you get to spend those locally sourced dollars. They don't have to be shared with another heritage area nor the national park next door.

Charting a Future for National Heritage Areas: I think it was a combination (of my and staff interest to form the group to examine the heritage areas). Brenda (Barrett) and others encouraged us to look to the future (of heritage areas). I am always a planner and wanted to share that visibility of the heritage areas. To be able to look at them and be able to share some of those results, their value. More succinctly, Congress works well off of reports. The report was an idea to make our heritage areas better known and better appreciated.

Criteria for National Heritage Areas: To me it's important to carry out the mission related to natural, cultural, historical landscapes and to tell their story. It doesn't always need facilities but it's nice to have a central point where people come. But the biggest thing is that they are partnerships with communities. They are also a public private partnership not only with the NPS but with other land managers, and with other public entities. It could even be water departments and things like that. I think the one in Augusta (Georgia) I went to deal with water issues. They are all partnerships which I think are very important.

I always thought that the criteria for having them come in to be a heritage area was that they had to have existing legislation and were supposed to be places that are significant for natural, cultural and historic resources, a benefit to the landscape. Yes, I do think they are an economic engine. They do help a community. I thought the ones that I brought in during my time matched up to being valuable to telling the story of the areas, historic preservation or some other aspect of our conservation efforts. I'm not aware of that (heritage areas as only a tourism engine) myself but it may be. The ones that came through when I was Director had a good important role, certainly not as protected as a national park unit but had goals which were checked periodically. They were supposed to be reviewed on some periodic basis. I think there was always the view that for it to stay a heritage area it had to be not only an economic driver but also something that is significant for natural and cultural and historic resource benefits as well.

NPS responsibility to heritage areas: I felt that the NPS coordination of the National Heritage Areas was good during my tenure. I worked with Brenda (Barrett) a lot. We were always underfunded, but the coordination went well. That was the reason for that report (*Charting a Future ...*). It was to see what game plan could further enhance coordination and appreciation of heritage areas as well as funding.

The heritage areas have fewer federal rules and regulations linked to them so it is often easier for better partnerships that might not require as much coordination legally or otherwise.

The American Heritage and Preservation Partnership fy2006 budget request: I actually thought we had a lot of support because of Preserve America from John Nau and from others helping us advocate for that. Saving America's Treasures with the National Trust for Historic Preservation and other things like that. All were hopefully helping us advocate. But, at the same time you put a budget together and never know. It was a way to bring partners from heritage areas, Preserve America and Save America's Treasures. I thought all those things were important. So that is why we tried to establish them with line item funding.

Heritage Areas are part of the economic stimulus to a community. They bring people to visit and appreciate what is protected by being part of the heritage area. I think the heritage areas continue to be able to have that community base support. Need to involve volunteers at a great level. It sets a good example of a good partnership with the NPS for doing things together, e.g., invasive species eradication, cultural activities and things of that nature can be done in conjunction between national parks, heritage areas, state parks, local parks, and private sector.

I think they are an economic engine as are our national park units. When I was Director, I had the research done to find out the economic impact of our national parks, a system wide valuation. They are a Fortune 500 company nearly. And, with its affiliates, which is what a heritage area is, linked into it further strengthens that effort as a whole for those areas which are not only trying to protect and preserve but also provide economic development.

I want to restate the importance of heritage areas. Stressing the partnership and cooperation and community building around the value of our cultural and historic resources and also building community to be more vocal to support the effort. If you look at the Centennial of the national parks, Find Your Park is the theme. Find Your Park doesn't just mean find one of the 412 national units. Its finding state parks, local parks, but also heritage areas. So together we make it a much bigger statement and I think that hopefully people are better able to appreciate when they find a heritage area maybe that heritage area that's in their backyard.

I am still involved with the national parks. I am the vice-chair of the South Florida National Park Trust which is in essence the friends group for the Everglades, Dry Tortugas, Big Cypress, Biscayne, and we work hard to try to raise money through multiple fund raisers.