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National Heritage Areas Administrative History Project



Alan Turnbull  
April 27, 2016

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

Alan Turnbull  
April 27, 2016

Interview conducted and transcribed by  
Antoinette J. Condo

This transcript was reviewed by Alan Turnbull

**Alan Turnbull Interview: April 27, 2016**

**National Heritage Areas Coordinating Office under RTCA:** I worked on heritage areas from 1993-1998. I was invited to work on heritage areas by my supervisor, Sam Stokes, in the RTCA (Rivers, Trails, and Community Conservation Assistance) program. At the time I was staff support for Sam. I was backstopping for administrative and logistical stuff. Steve Morris was involved as well. And, then significantly, Judy Hart. She was more substantively involved than I was and had more authority over her time and direction of her work. Sam was already aligned to do this sort of thing because of his previous work with the National Trust (for Historic Preservation).

Some of the people we worked with at the Coalition (National Coalition for Heritage Areas) were Shelley Mastran, Elizabeth Watson, and Alvin Rosenbaum. Alvin was always trying to make the business happen. He and Elizabeth had some strained relationships. They were probably competitors looking for contracts. We had received an unsolicited proposal from Alvin Rosenbaum to run the heritage area program for us from his newly created National Center for Heritage Development.

About 1997 I had a governor's appointed position with the Maryland Heritage Areas Authority. This was in my private life, independent of my NPS work, but provided me with additional exposure to the heritage area business.

During my time working on the heritage areas one of our preoccupations was trying to help, within the bounds of the law and government ethics, any efforts on the Hill to create clarifying omnibus legislation for NPS that would: guide heritage areas and be clear about what the agency should do, guide how we should approach these, establish what NPS would provide to heritage areas, give us some guidance about appropriated funds being granted to heritage areas through cooperative agreements, give guidance about the nature of management entities, and clarify the sunset of financial assistance to heritage areas.

**Sunsetting of national heritage areas:** I remember there was the one heritage area that would never go away that would get its money every year. It was just sort of notorious. I think people were all cynical about any of them ever actually sunsetting. We all wanted to see a real sunset and we all believed in the value of the sunset to crack the whip, to be a positive tension to cause the management entities to become independent and get their own business models shaped up so they would be ready to stand on their own when the NPS money dried up. I think everyone who was working on them at my level felt that. But the people who had been around for a while and worked in the field felt pretty cynical. Any heritage area that had a working congressman worth a dam was going to continue to get money as long as that congressman stayed connected. The kind of cynicism you expect from anybody who goes through Washington.

I remember that we were always focusing on the concept of the management entity, and what characterized a good management entity and how creative different heritage areas got with the kinds of management entities they could create or adopt to serve that purpose.

**RTCA as lead office:** I always have thought that RTCA was/is the best thing the NPS has going. It's got the most entrepreneurial staff, sort of *can-do* culture and so in that way I'd probably say that it was the right place to foster the heritage area idea. But our staff was never cut out to be involved with big sums of money, and the breadth of what the local folks tried to accomplish under the mantle of heritage area was beyond what RTCA focuses on. I don't know if our staff had the kind of business skills that would be helpful for swimming in that world. I think our community outreach skills were why we were thought to be appropriate to oversee the national heritage area initiative. One of the things that always kind of characterized RTCA was that our staff will work long and hard to help communities to do visioning for themselves and figure out what their assets are, what they can build on, what assets they need to protect because they are fundamental to the sense of place. I think that's the level on which our involvement made a lot of sense. But I think we were out of our depth in trying to corral organizations that had million dollar a year budgets and had a lot of wheelers and dealers looking for their piece all the time.

**Challenges:** We had a cooperative agreement that had 22 agreements. The Trust had a database that they were compiling of all possible heritage areas and their accomplishments. We came to believe that we were either under implicit or explicit instructions that the RTCA program should stop providing assistance to nascent national heritage areas. Through our open applications from areas that wanted to have RTCA assistance, if we sensed that an organization was asking for assistance to shape itself up as a potential applicant to get congressional designation as a new national heritage area, we were not supposed to assist them. We always could be candid with non-governmental organizations. We, as a government agency, could not tell a non-governmental organization what it could and couldn't do. But we came to believe, and I don't know if this was explicitly or implicitly from congress or from the directorate, that somehow, we came to understand that we were supposed to not nurture prospective new national heritage areas through the RTCA program. I think we spawned a number of them early on either intentionally or just because organically that's the way they went but at some point, we ceased to knowingly support heritage area development efforts.

I do remember a poster that one of the NPS appropriations committee congressmen had that showed him wanted for treason because of his support for heritage areas and the supposed land grab they constituted. This was from a property rights organization. We, of course, felt that there was no basis to such claims. You can read the legislation and see that there is no way the federal government could do anything regarding infringing anyone's property rights.