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Donald J. "Don" Hellmann
April 20, 2016

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

Donald J. "Don" Hellmann
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Interview conducted and transcribed by
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This transcript was reviewed by Donald Hellmann

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Early experience with National Heritage Areas: I had had no exposure to heritage areas other than incidental exposure prior to my time of coming to the NPS. Illinois & Michigan, Blackstone, Delaware & Lehigh, and South West Pennsylvania were established in the late '80s. Those were the ones created before my tenure in the Office of Legislative Affairs.

I began working with heritage areas soon after my joining the NPS in December 1994. I have been involved with most of the heritage areas that have been considered by Congress in that almost 22-year period. The first system wide bill was drafted prior to my coming to the NPS. But that was just one of many program legislation bills that has been considered over the years.

The first National Heritage Area, Illinois & Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor, goes back to the mid '80s and at that time it was being considered as an alternative to a national park unit, another model to be used for protecting significant resources of the country as well as of the area. I think at that time no one envisioned that in 2018 we would have 49. So, it was somewhat of an experiment during that time.

Reasons for congressional interest: I think it's a couple of factors. I think once the Illinois & Michigan Canal started, and Blackstone and Delaware & Lehigh followed, and the concept was being discussed and talked about, more people across the country started considering a heritage area as an alternative to creating a national park which would cover a wider area as well as a larger number of resources scattered through a wider area. That discussion caused interest in the Congress to create it as an alternative model to creating a national park. Some felt the national park model was a little too heavy-handed from the government side and they saw it as a way to leave the power at the state and local level, which a lot of members supported. They thought it was a less expensive drag on the federal budget. Something where the federal government could provide some seed money and that could be leveraged with state and local funds.

Changing congressional attitudes: My perception is that it has been somewhat political. The Democratic Party and members of the Democratic Party on the committees we worked with on National Heritage Area legislation saw it as another means of protecting natural and cultural resources. I think there are various Republicans who agreed with that. But, starting in the mid '90s when Republicans took over the 104th Congress, up to the present day, there was great skepticism that remained, and with some who are in key positions in committees that have to deal with this legislation, about what National Heritage Areas are trying to do.

I have heard concerns that it is a land use control mechanism. A little heavy handed by the government. To the extent that the concerned Republicans have requested the Congressional Research Service at times to look at that very issue to determine what detrimental effect National Heritage Areas were having on private property rights. They did look into it one or two times and CRS could not find any effect that was detrimental.

I think that with any park legislation that is out there you may have some supporters and some detractors and some people that question what is trying to be achieved. It is not unique to heritage areas. In the past 20 years I can tell you there has been great skepticism on the part of a

number of Republican members about heritage areas in general and exactly what they are trying to do and achieve and whether or not the NPS should have this program and whether or not heritage areas should be supported by federal funding.

The economics is the very point that NPS has been trying to make a lot of times. Heritage areas provide a boost to the local economy, towns, and sites that are featured in a National Heritage Area. It's a way to get people into those areas to learn about those resources and they eat at restaurants, sleep in hotels, buy souvenirs. I think some myths have been created about them having an effect on people's private property. They (Congress) don't want people to be forced to do anything with these (National Heritage Areas). We have constantly made the point that no one has to do anything with the National Heritage Area. If their home site or their property is a famous property, the NPS is not going to force them to do anything. They will not have people walking through their yards or they will not be forced to do anything with the heritage area.

Program legislation: One of the reasons we have been trying to promote the legislation to create a National Heritage Area program is because they have all been created piecemeal and in a slightly different manner. The standards by which we determine whether or not an area should be designated have been a little loose.

By having legislation to create a National Heritage Areas program we will be setting specific criteria in law so that as future areas become interested, they will know how an assessment will be made of the resources of their area, and the model that will be used for that area for providing federal assistance. And federal funding, should an area be designated, would be similar going forward instead of this piecemeal approach that we have had.

Second, it would recognize that all the 49 National Heritage Areas we have now are interrelated. They are each protecting, preserving, and promoting the natural and cultural resources of their particular area and collectively they are helping to tell our story of America and how it developed through its history, environment, and resources that are found in the area.

Benefit to NPS?: Yes, the NPS mission is to do similar things on a nationwide level. Each of these National Heritage Areas is taking the next step because the NPS cannot protect and preserve everything nor protect and preserve all of these stories that have gone on in these areas. They are a way to get state and local agencies to work with NPS to tell the collective American stories. These areas are critical to assisting the work we have been charged by Congress to do.

NPS support: During the Clinton administration we had big support for trying to get a program bill through Congress, one to establish a National Heritage Areas program. That enthusiasm waned a great deal during the administration of President Bush 2001 and 2002. There was certainly a renewed interest in this through Director Jarvis. He was committed to getting a program bill through Congress. However, I don't believe it has been much on the radar screen of the Secretary's Office either with Secretary Salazar or Jewell. I think they were supportive of the program, but I have not seen them stepping out front on this one.

Changes in bills: I think it has been directly because of what the NPS has suggested. We have tried to make the bills a little more uniform. So that even though the program legislation that

spells out all the individual criteria by which a potential area will be judged has not been passed, we have tried to incorporate those standards in as many of the individual bills as possible as they have been considered by Congress over the past 22 years. This has been because of the working relationship our office has had with the NPS National Heritage Area Coordinating Office. We worked closely with Brenda Barrett and Martha (Raymond) on defining the criteria and looked closely at the legislation as it was being drafted to establish each new National Heritage Area.

Sometimes the members write the bill that the local community has asked them to write, and the member introduces the bill before we have a chance to see it. Other times they (members of Congress) ask us to write a bill or review a bill in draft and suggest any changes to it.

Senator Craig Thomas: I think he was important for continuing the discussion and the dialogue about the need for program legislation. Interestingly enough, I had a discussion with Gretchen Long who is on our NPS Advisory Board, from Wyoming and knew Craig Thomas very well. In fact, she and I had some meetings with him when he was our subcommittee chairman on the Senate side. She said that he never really totally bought into heritage areas. That wasn't surprising. We knew at the time, with him being a conservative western member that he needed to be convinced about these. I think he engaged because of Gretchen's request and other members who were familiar with National Heritage Areas and because of his position as chairman on our NPS subcommittee on the Senate side.

He was willing to give us the benefit of the doubt and work with us on this model, and, because he saw that heritage areas might be another alternative to creating more expensive park sites with a longer-term and bigger federal commitment.

One time while questioning our witness at a hearing on a bill to create a new national park, Senator Thomas said, "How many Abraham Lincoln sites does the NPS need to have?" He was somewhat skeptical of always having to create something as a new unit of the NPS. Heritage areas gave him a way of protecting resources that was not as costly to the federal government.

Other congressional support: Some strong supporters over the years have been Congressman Bruce Vento who was chair of the parks House subcommittee and Rick Healy, who worked for Congressman Vento, and who had experience with a number of these areas. I think he was more in tuned with what was going on. Congressman (John) Murtha created his own heritage area in Pennsylvania, which was a hybrid model in itself.

Congressman (Ralph) Regula, Chair of our Interior Appropriations Subcommittee; several members of the Rhode Island delegation who loved the Blackstone River Valley to the point that now we have a new national historical park of selected key parcels of the valley there. I think there have been a number of other members including Senator Dale Bumpers from Arkansas who was the chair of our parks' subcommittee for a number of years too.

Testimony at National Heritage Area hearings: At lot of the hearings, the number of witnesses was limited. They would have the representative of the local supporters of the heritage area. There were not many supporters or opponents that would show up. In opposition, the committees might have some groups from time to time to express concern about heritage areas

program legislation or individual legislation because of private property rights. These have not been as visible in recent years.

NPS the appropriate *home* for National Heritage Areas: There have been just a couple of failed attempts to put heritage areas in another agency. In the 104th Congress omnibus bill, the Silos and Smokestacks National Heritage Area was put under the Agriculture Department, but they didn't know what to do with it. A few years later, Congress changed that and put it under the NPS. It was because the local people complained to their local congressmen that they had not received any support for the heritage area. So, Congress transferred it by legislation. It seems to me that there was some discussion of putting the Alaska Kenai Mountains Heritage area in the USDA Forest Service and we objected after our former experience in Iowa. The Cache La Poudre River also had a large amount of Forest Service land in the boundary and there was some discussion about a Forest Service role there, but that never materialized.

There is another point I would like to bring up: A point that I think is still in dispute to this day. My experience when we first started with these heritage areas is that the NPS would be seen as a catalyst to getting these areas created with a 15-year timeline of providing federal assistance, but at the end of which the heritage area would be self-sufficient. In the mid '90s, that was the thinking. The leadership of the heritage areas understood they would get a limited period of federal funding. When they all started coming to the end of their 15 years, they wanted federal funding to be extended for another 15 years. That provided a bit of a struggle for the NPS at that time. Some of us in NPS felt that the heritage areas were pulling back on their commitment made at the time of their establishment. What I have found personally and professionally irritating is the very heritage area leaders who started these areas, when they came back for their renewal of federal funding, totally denied that they had ever understood the federal money would only be seed money to get them up and started. I have been absolutely baffled to hear them say that they didn't understand that that was what the commitment was at the beginning. In my view, they had made a commitment to be self-sufficient in a specific time period. I think they have weakened their cause by switching stream and not being as forthright as they should be. I think they could have come in and said yes, they knew that federal funding was to sunset, but they found that they needed more funding, and this was the reason why, rather than deny any understanding at all of the original agreement.

Sunsetting: I have mixed feelings about sunseting of federal funding. I certainly understand their reasoning for not wanting federal funding to sunset. It makes it easier for them to raise funds at the state and local level if the federal government has some commitment to these areas over a longer period of time. I understand that reasoning. I have seen evidence that in certain areas they have leveraged federal funding on more than a one-to-one basis. On the other hand, I do wonder if, for some of them, the federal funding is a crutch. A good number are matching federal funding on just a one-to-one basis. It has not turned out to be as much of a catalyst as we had thought or hoped. And then, we have the larger overall question of constrained federal budgets. If you know federal budgets are constrained, do you continue to support all of them, or do you reduce the money going to the established ones so as to give the newer ones more chance to be viable and successful? I'm afraid that we are falling back into a bit of a stagnation with some of the heritage areas because the amount of money we are giving these new areas is very limited and they are having trouble leveraging state and local funds.

Funding: It is a misnomer to say it has been zeroed out in the administration's budget. During the Obama administration, they have cut back the request from the level Congress usually funds heritage areas. Primarily this is done because there are competing priorities and it is known the heritage areas will get the money put back in. That is some of that gamesmanship that goes on between Administration and Congress each year. It's a zero sums game these days. All you have to do is listen to the news. When they get into the budget fights every year, they know there is only so much money available and they have to figure out who gets what pieces of the pie. So, it is difficult to provide heritage areas with money that is going to be meaningful. One of the concerns about the funding too: It's my understanding back in the '90s the heritage area funding was to be used for two purposes; a small amount to support staff that were there to provide services to the heritage area and some in grants to groups to do program work. But it seems to me that (now) the heritage areas are using most of the federal funding every year for staff support, going to pay salaries. Very little is going out for programs. It makes me have mixed feelings about how federal funding is used and how long it should go on. It is holding back newer areas because of continued support for the longer established National Heritage Areas.