National Heritage Areas (NHAs) are created by Congress through federal law to promote the conservation of natural, cultural, and historic resources that combine to form a cohesive, nationally important landscape. Through their resources and communities, NHAs tell nationally important stories that celebrate our diverse heritage. NHAs provide a grassroots, community-driven approach to heritage conservation and economic development. Through public-private partnerships, NHAs enable support of historic preservation, natural resource conservation, recreation, heritage tourism, and educational projects. Matching federal funds and leveraging additional resources for projects, NHAs foster pride of place and an enduring stewardship ethic.

WHERE NATURE AND CULTURE CONNECT

PROGRAM HISTORY

On August 26, 1986, President Ronald Reagan signed a law establishing the Illinois & Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor as the nation’s first national heritage area—a new kind of national park that combined preservation, conservation, recreation, education, and economic development. Today, the Illinois & Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor maintains the 87 mile towpath as a trail that is located on the same path once used by mule tenders. The area, with many historic structures, including canal locks and lock tenders’ homes, draws more than a million visitors annually.

As of 2020, the program has grown to 50 areas in 33 states that celebrate and preserve the nationally important history—our nation’s story—of the late 1800s and early 1900s that make us a unique country—from the rise of our nation’s 16th president, Abraham Lincoln, to the Great American Depression to the rise of railroads and automobiles. These areas, known as the National Heritage Areas (NHAs), are to the cultural landscape what national parks and monuments are to the natural landscape. They attract visitors who support local businesses, increase job opportunities, revitalize both urban and rural communities, and encourage the reuse of historic buildings.

RECREATION AND TRAIL DEVELOPMENT

NHAs improve access to the cultural and natural resources they were designated to celebrate and protect. Granting access to recreational opportunities is important for public engagement and stewardship, which are essential to the mission of all NHAs. Many recreation projects in NHAs focus on the creation of multi-use hiking and biking trails along historic infrastructure—canals, industrial sites, and railroads. Trails wind through natural and urban environments, with historic resources providing points of intrigue for hikers, bikers, runners, and walkers. Just as trails rely on partnerships within communities, they also serve to create and strengthen connections between communities across the country. People enjoy National Heritage Areas as destinations for hiking, biking, paddling, walking, and running. NHA partners support other trail events that help bring visitors, increase local participation, and develop new ideas for future events. The National Park Service provides guidance to facilitate these types of projects and helps NHA partnerships foster pride of place and an enduring stewardship ethic.

CONSERVATION

Conservation is a hallmark of NHAs. By conserving natural resources and historic sites, the NHA program helps to promote the economic interests of communities while protecting the largest parks in the nation. In addition to historic and cultural resources, NHAs are called upon to protect the nation’s important landscapes, ecosystems, and special qualities by preserving and improving the natural environment in which they exist. National Historic Landmarks, NHAs are preserving important historic buildings and districts. Because of these efforts, landmarks in our nation’s engineering and labor history have been reclaimed and repurposed as museums, nature preserves, and town centers. The benefits of historic preservation are as varied as the resources that make up the NHAs program. National Heritage Areas work to affirm nation-wide heritage stories that celebrate our diverse heritage. NHAs provide a grassroots, community-driven approach to conservation of natural, historic, scenic, and cultural resources, while sustainably using economic assets. The NHA program supports public-private partnerships to conserve and improve the landscape for the benefit of communities who live and work in the area. NHAs are a powerful tool to promote economic development, provide creative and collaborative approaches to conservation. These efforts have brought to light the values of local development and community engagement that National Heritage Areas were created to achieve.

BECOMING A NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA

National Heritage Areas are created by Congress through legislation. NHA workshops with the National Park Service (NPS) promote the conservation of natural, historic, scenic, and cultural resources, while sustaining the area’s economic vitality. The NPS assists the NHA’s coordinating organization in developing a management plan for the administration, use of federal funding, and interpretation of the heritage area.

PRESERVING OUR HERITAGE WHILE FOSTERING SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

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Through use of historic preservation tax credits, grants, archaeological excavations, adding sites to the National Register of Historic Places, and National Historic Landmarks, NHAs are preserving important historic buildings and districts. Because of these efforts, landmarks in our nation’s engineering and labor history have been reclaimed and repurposed as museums, nature preserves, and town centers. The benefits of historic preservation are as varied as the resources that make up the NHAs program. National Heritage Areas work to affirm nation-wide heritage stories that celebrate our diverse heritage. NHAs provide a grassroots, community-driven approach to conservation of natural, historic, scenic, and cultural resources, while sustainably using economic assets, while instilling pride in local history and traditions. They attract visitors who support local businesses, increase job opportunities, revitalize both urban and rural communities, and encourage the reuse of historic buildings.

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NATIONAL PARK SERVICE ROLE

NHA programs work with the National Park Service (NPS) and local partners to leverage conservation approaches by supporting community-driven initiatives. NPS staff provide planning, technical, financial, and advocacy support. NHAs are not National Park units but instead are public-private partnerships. NHAs are required to match their Heritage Partnership Program funds as appropriated by Congress. They often highlight the importance of their resources and the national story they tell.

EDUCATION & STEWARDSHIP

Along with the goals of cultural, historical, and natural resource protection, national heritage areas also strive to improve the quality of life in their regions by fostering the development of sustainable economies as set forth in their designation legislation. This designation often highlights the importance of their resources and the national story they tell.

Preservation and conservation projects undertaken by the NHAs and their partners have, over time, added economic value through increased heritage tourism, increased recreational opportunities such as trail and water access, and increased the quality of life for residents by reconnecting them with the resources that make their areas unique.

They support communities, generating economic value by keeping banks and businesses in the area while encouraging citizens to recognize, restore, and explore their resources. NHAs are required to match their Heritage Partnership Program funds as appropriated by Congress. They often highlight the importance of their resources and the national story they tell.

LANDSCAPE & PRESERVATION

As listed in landscapes, NHAs commonly resources on a large scale. NHAs offer the NPS a strategy to expand stewardship beyond park boundaries. For example, the 550-square-mile Essex NHA includes the homes and landscapes of noted authors, such as Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. These partnerships allow both organizations to fulfill shared stewardship, interpretation, and preservation goals.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIES

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