

INCORPORATING NATURAL HISTORY CONSERVATION INTO THE PROPOSED MISSISSIPPI DELTA NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA

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“A National Heritage Area is a place designated by the United States Congress where natural, cultural, historic and recreational resources combine to form a cohesive, nationally distinctive landscape arising from patterns of human activity shaped by geography. These patterns make National Heritage Areas representative of the national experience through the physical features that remain and the traditions that have evolved in the areas. Continued use of the National Heritage Areas by people whose traditions helped to shape the landscapes enhances their significance.”

-www.cr.nps.gov/heritageareas

Introduction

National Heritage Areas (NHAs) are a designation created by the U.S. Congress to encourage local participation in the conservation of cultural, historic, and natural amenities. The U.S. National Park Service (NPS) partners with local communities and organizations to manage these areas. In northwestern Mississippi, the NPS and the Delta Center for Culture and Learning at Delta State University are working together to create the Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area (MDNHA) to preserve and promote themes from the area's rich cultural history, including the origin and evolution of blues music, the Civil Rights movement, and a rich literary tradition. This research project explores opportunities for incorporating the area's natural history into the proposed NHA.

The proposed research addresses significant policy and management concerns, drawing on experiences from other National Heritage Areas that include a natural history component. Ways to integrate natural and cultural history into a management plan will be explored, and the potential to incorporate public participation will be examined, accounting for cultural characteristics unique to the Delta region. Possibilities for incorporating participatory education and action research into the management agenda are highlighted as well.

Although heritage areas are management entities, their primary function is not to regulate the activities of local residents. Rather, heritage areas serve to preserve and tell the stories of a region, thereby creating a sense of cultural pride and unity in the local population, as well as opening up economic opportunities tied to cultural tourism and marketing regionally significant products. National Heritage Areas rely on local initiative and control; the NPS takes a partnership approach to the management of each site, allowing local entities to take the lead in crafting the management agenda.

Objectives

The primary purpose of this study is to understand the potential for the proposed Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area to incorporate natural history into its management approach, and to propose procedures that would facilitate this goal. Specific objectives of this study are:

- (1) Understand the variety of ways in which natural history is incorporated as an element of local heritage in existing heritage areas.
- (2) Understand elements of the Delta's natural history and survey opportunities to incorporate this natural history into the proposed Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area.
- (3) Identify potential partner organizations that are engaged in managing nationally significant natural resources within the boundaries of the NHA.
- (4) Develop opportunities to incorporate participatory research and education into the process of creating and managing a national heritage area in the Mississippi Delta.

Design

The general approach in this study will be exploratory, inductive, and qualitative. The research incorporates two data collection goals. First, data will be collected that help assess how natural history has been incorporated into existing National Heritage Areas. Second, data will be collected that help to identify important elements of the Delta's natural history, and how the stories attached to this history might be told and promoted.

Data Collection

The study will draw upon three sources of data: (1) existing documentation about heritage areas in general and about specific heritage sites; (2) individuals involved in the management of existing heritage areas; and (3) Delta residents that are collaborating in the creation of the Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area, or that possess knowledge and experience that might advance the process of creating this heritage area.

Data collection will focus on the experiences of (1) the 24 existing heritage areas and the national heritage program of the National Park Service, through review of documents and contact with staff and managers; (2) community groups in the Delta which will participate in the creation and management of the NHA, if approved, and who can provide a local perspective on what needs to be preserved and what stories need to be told; and (3) resource managers in Delta sites who can provide information on the existing status of the Delta's natural resources and stories attached to this legacy, including representatives from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the USDA Forest Service, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Army Corps of Engineers, the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks, the Mississippi Land Trust, the Delta Land Trust, local hunting clubs, environmental organizations, and similar groups to be identified as the project progresses.

Specific data collection activities include (1) a systematic review of existing documents to generate background information; (2) a survey of managers of other heritage areas to assess how they incorporate natural history into their projects, and (3) interviews with managers, community members, and officials in positions to inform the researchers about the Delta's heritage.

Data Analysis

Data analysis will focus on identifying common themes with relevance to policy initiatives pertaining to the development of the MDNHA. Transcripts from interviews will be coded based on these themes, and categorized into a framework to synthesize the information from various parties. The primary goal is to develop a set of policy recommendations as to how natural history might be incorporated into the management plan for the MDNHA.

Products

The primary product of this study will be a report submitted to the Delta Center for Culture and Learning. The Delta Center can then make the results available to a wider audience, including policymakers, NHA managers and partners, community residents, the NPS, and other parties interested in the creation of the MDNHA.

A presentation based on preliminary findings from this study will be given in June, 2004 at the International Symposium on Society and Resource Management.

Results from this study may be used to prepare articles to be submitted for publication.

Timeline

April 2004	Develop proposal
May 2004	Submit proposal for approval by IRB Analyze conditions in national heritage areas by searching internet and other documentation Initiate survey of existing national heritage areas to gather data on local natural history interpretation Interview members of Delta organizations that may serve as partners in the MDNHA
June 2004	Present preliminary findings and research design at the ISSRM, Keystone, CO Continue data collection
July 2004	Visit NHAs to discuss management strategies
August 2004	Analyze data Prepare report

Research Ethics

This research will be carried out in accordance with accepted ethical practices and the policies and procedures of the DSU Institutional Review Board (IRB). The purposes of the study and the expected commitment will be explained to participants prior to all data collection activities. Participants will be assured of confidentiality, and all researchers associated with the project will place high importance on protecting the privacy of all individuals involved in the research project. Participants will be notified who they can contact with questions or to resolve any problems with the study. Data that are presented publicly will not include individual identifying characteristics, without express prior consent from the respondent.

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