

Blue Ridge Heritage preserves, promotes our rich traditions

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viewpoint**

Before “cultural tourism” became a buzzword and creative economy the latest rage, Western North Carolina was attracting visitors interested in its landmarks and the arts of its people. Potters, chair makers, quilters, woodcarvers and other artisans found ready outlets and cash for their handiwork.

“Isn't it nice to be a headlight rather than a taillight all the time,” quipped Becky Anderson, former executive director of HandMade in America, who's now taken the job as president of the board for the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area.

The Blue Ridge National Heritage Area encompasses the 25 counties of Western North Carolina blessed with natural beauty, the native culture of the Cherokee, mountain music, a rich history of arts and crafts and thousands of family farms. In 2003, the U.S. Congress recognized North Carolina's Blue Ridge as a unique region worthy of national designation and protection under the National Park System. But it's more than a place.

Now it's officially a partnership, drawing on resources of artists, conservationists, farmers, nonprofits, historians, museums and many others across the mountains to sustain the heritage we enjoy here and stimulate more jobs and prosperity.

The Blue Ridge National Heritage Area Partnership unveiled its new name at the group's annual meeting last week at the N.C. Arboretum, giving stakeholders a review of the area and group's successes. Since 2003, the organization trusted with preserving and promoting our Blue Ridge heritage and landscape has awarded 78 grants totaling \$1.2 million.

Those grants have been matched by nearly \$2.2 million in other funds. Recent projects have included a new interpretative map of the Bartram Trail, the 80-mile-long footpath through Western North Carolina that retraces the travels of the 18th-century naturalist William Bartram through Cherokee country. The Smoky Mountain Native Plants Association in Graham County has gotten seed money to promote locally produced cornmeal flavored with ramps, that pungent mountain delicacy.

Other funds have gone to Blue Ridge Forever, the consortium of land trust groups campaigning to stem the tide of family farms being paved under for new developments across our state. There's a bitter saying that “whenever a farmer dies, a subdivision is born,” explained Phyllis Stiles, executive director of Blue Ridge Forever. With 13,000 family farms employing some 33,000 people across the region, we can't afford to simply let those farms disappear. Instead, many farmers are taking advantage of conservation

easements, selling off the rights to future development to guarantee their land stays in active agriculture.

Preserving and promoting the arts and crafts of the region also protects livelihoods. From the pioneering efforts of Lucy Morgan at Penland and the Campbells at the John C. Campbell Folk School, mountain natives have learned to turn their talents and skills handed down for generations into money to put food on their table and better lives for their children.

That heritage continues as the N.C. Arts Council has to resist the temptation to send all of its annual fellowships and grants to the west, conceded Mary Regan, the veteran director of the arts council.

In fact, WNC leads the state in the per capita distribution of arts grants with \$1.28 per capita going to the mountains versus 77 cents per capita in the Piedmont and 65 cents in the coastal region, Regan said.

Where artists are prone to gather, other businesses and creative talents are likely to follow, Regan said. “You invented the creative economy here in Western North Carolina.”

With its headquarters at the Blue Ridge Parkway visitors center near Asheville and under the leadership of a new executive director, Angie Chandler, the BRNHA Partnership is well-positioned to fulfill its mission in years ahead. This upcoming cycle, the partnership will have \$338,000 to distribute in grants to worthy projects for heritage, conservation and crafts that will ultimately draw more visitors and money to our region.

From protecting farms to developing new trail guides or products from mountain herbs, and producing arts and crafts sought by collectors worldwide, the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area has proved itself as a worthy investment in both place and people.

<http://www.citizen-times.com/article/20100825/OPINION01/308250014/Blue-Ridge-Heritage-preserves-promotes-our-rich-traditions>