

BLUE RIDGE NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA In Review : 2011

This has been a year of implementing many new and exciting initiatives to help us lay the groundwork for strengthening our region, supporting our partners and reaching out to our communities. Here are some highlights:

NEW GRANT AWARDS

The Blue Ridge National Heritage Area Partnership encourages partners at a grassroots level to develop initiatives that will sustain the heritage and cultural treasures of our region. To help us complete this work, in 2011, we awarded 20 new grants amounting to nearly \$245,000. A sampling of these awards include:

- ▶ \$3,455 to **Graham County Cooperative Extension** to support the marketing of a Graham County Barn Quilt Trail.
- ▶ \$25,000 to the **Mount Airy Museum of Regional History** for the development of a traveling exhibit on local instrument-making traditions.
- ▶ \$10,000 to **Rutherford County** to support the development of a documentary film about the Bechtler Mint and gold mining.
- ▶ \$8,000 to the **Yadkin Valley Heritage Corridor Partnership** for a brochure marketing heritage sites in the four-county corridor.

COMPLETED GRANT PROJECTS

We celebrated several grand openings of finished projects, including:

- ▶ The new **Environmental Education Center** at the W. Kerr Scott Reservoir in Wilkesboro, where a BRNHA grant supported the creation of exhibits for children on forest species and habitat conservation.
- ▶ A new **Cherokee Homestead Exhibit** in Hayesville, with a Cherokee winter house supported by a BRNHA grant.
- ▶ The Oconaluftee Visitor Center in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park opened with **cultural heritage exhibits** that were supported by a BRNHA grant to the Friends of the Smokies.

- ▶ The rehabilitation of the **Historic Carson House Barn**, funded by BRNHA, provided space for a new 19th-Century Farm Life Exhibit.

Since its inception in 2003, the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area Partnership has awarded 90 grants totaling nearly \$1.5 million and leveraging another \$2.7 million in matching contributions from local governments and the private sector for a total impact of \$4.2 million in our region. These grants have funded projects in all 25 counties of Western North Carolina and have been awarded to organizations working on region-wide initiatives as well as to local heritage projects.

NEW INITIATIVES

- ▶ **Blue Ridge Music Trail.** The Blue Ridge National Heritage Area is said to have one of the richest repositories of folk songs and lore in the Southeastern United States. This year, the BRNHA Partnership embarked on a project designed to help further develop and fully market this cultural treasure. Partnering with the NC Arts Council, the BRNHA funded phase I of the project, a survey to evaluate the economic impact of the traditional music festivals and venues in the region. From this survey of baseline data, an all-new Blue Ridge Music Trail will be designed and developed.
- ▶ The natural heritage of our region is the bedrock of who and what we are, and also a very fragile resource. In partnership with UNC-Asheville, RENC, US Forest Service, NC Department of Environmental and Natural Resources, Appalachian State University, and the NC Mountain Resources Commission, the BRNHA has embarked on the development of a **Western North Carolina Sustainability and Vitality Index**. This ongoing initiative will provide vital information about the health of the region's natural environment, cultural resources and its economy and can be used as a resource in regional decision-making.

OUTREACH & EDUCATION

- ▶ **Field visits.** The BRNHA is committed to keeping our relationships strong with regional, state, and national partners. The BRNHA staff visited with or made presentations to more than 125 partner groups throughout the 25-county region.
- ▶ **Making connections.** Looking for opportunities to expand and develop our heritage resources, and at the suggestion of our partners, the BRNHA convened a meeting to discuss an educational and promotional initiative surrounding the gem and mineral resources in our region.
- ▶ **Educational opportunities.** To help partners and regional groups strengthen their funding resources, the BRNHA Partnership hosted a two-day regional workshop, Essential Grant Skills, presented by the nationally acclaimed Grantsmanship Center.
- ▶ **Other Outreach & Education**
 - * Partnered with the NC Department of Cultural Resources on a state-wide workshop program to teach rural arts and culture non-profits how to build partnerships.
 - * Partnered with NC Department of Cultural Resources and Friends of Mountain History, Inc. to support the growth and sustainability of Museums in Partnership, a network of more than 100 museums of all sizes in the region.

RESEARCH AND VISITOR SERVICES

The BRNHA enjoys a strong partnership with the Blue Ridge Parkway and staffs a Regional Information Desk at the Parkway's Visitor Center in Asheville to help visitors explore the natural and cultural heritage and small towns in our region.

- ▶ Our 30 volunteers and staff greeted more than 71,000 visitors to the Center from October 2010 through July 2011. Since the opening of the Visitor Center in late 2007, more than 205,000 visitors have been served.

- ▶ We updated and printed a Blue Ridge Parkway Visitor Center rack card in support of the Parkway.
- ▶ To learn more about visitor behavior and choices at the Visitor Center, the BRNHA conducted a visitor survey in October and November 2010, and again during the month of August 2011. The first study affirmed that visitors overwhelmingly like the facility and that many adjust their travel plans, both on and off the Parkway, based on the visitor information they receive. The second study, to be completed in early fall 2011, will help guide the development of visitor programming to ensure that visitor needs are being met.

MARKETING

- ▶ **Website**
 - * To make the site more usable by both visitors and partners, strengthen our brand awareness, and extend our reach, we have undertaken an extensive Search Engine Optimization program using the services of JB Media Group in Asheville.
 - * We have initiated a redesign of the home page not only to enhance SEO, but to enhance the connection between the BRNHA and our partners.
 - * The preliminary research done for this project by JB Media Group shows that the BRNHA website enjoys a high authority with its affiliation with the National Park Service website and visitnc.com. A comparison study of website visitation between July 2010 and July 2011 shows a 62% increase. The SEO work will be completed in November.
 - * Other additions to the site include the posting of the 52 Living Traditions Moments, 2-minute radio vignettes produced by and aired on WNCW public radio; a new “Historic Small Towns & Cities” section; and a vastly expanded “Festivals & Events” section in which our partners events are listed for free.
- ▶ **Brand and Co-op Advertising.** We have revamped and streamlined the BRNHA’s brand advertising and cooperative advertising programs to more seamlessly support and connect

with the branding programs of our region’s three tourism marketing Host Groups. The focus of both programs is on the visitor and meeting the needs of the specific sub-regions.

- ▶ **Interpretive Signage.** A new Project Manager will be at the helm in September to guide it through its final stages. In addition, regional gateway signs, which were not part of the original contract, have been approved for placement. The project is expected to move forward steadily and be completed by mid-summer of 2013.
- ▶ To thank and support the first 22 sites that invested in the program, the BRNHA developed and printed 25,000 copies of “Heritage Treasures of the Blue Ridge,” a brochure that encourages visitors to visit these sites and go to their websites for more information.

STATE PARTNERS MARKETING

- ▶ Participated in a Charlotte Media Mission sponsored by the NC Department of Commerce Division of Tourism, Film and Sports Development.
- ▶ Hosted a Travel South FAM group at the Blue Ridge Parkway Visitor Center.
- ▶ Helped sponsor the 2011 NC Governor’s Conference on Tourism in Asheville.

OTHER MARKETING INITIATIVES

- ▶ In preparation for launching a public awareness campaign, the BRNHA developed a PowerPoint presentation and is creating a DVD to tell the story of why our region is important. This tool will be used in a speakers’ bureau to help support and strengthen the public’s awareness of the heritage treasures of the region and the need to ensure their sustainability. It will also be a resource for front-line training for those in the hospitality industry, to help them understand the importance of our resources and encourage them to become advocates for sustainability.
- ▶ We updated the BRNHA Visitor Map Brochure, and to better serve our partners, we added information about the connection to our tourism Host Groups. More than 200,000 copies of the brochure have been distributed

in visitor and welcome centers in three states.

- ▶ We continue our Partner and Visitor Communications program, publishing two monthly e-newsletters, *On the Blue Ridge*, with news for and about our partners in the region, and *Blue Ridge Explorer*, with information about events of interest to visitors. Metrics show that we enjoy a strong open rate averaging over 70% on both of these e-communications.

TRADITIONAL ARTIST DIRECTORY

This unique resource continues to grow on the BRNHA website. This year, in partnership with the North Carolina Folklife Institute, we have added over 100 artists to the Traditional Artist Directory, including “Historic Artists” who have made an impact on our music heritage but who have passed away.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS TRANSITIONS

The BRNHA Partnership welcomed several new board members this year, including Gwynne Rukenbrod, appointed by HandMade in America; Darin Waters, appointed by AdvantageWest; Mary Jane Ferguson, appointed by the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians; and Karen Paar, appointed by the Education and Research Consortium.

We are fortunate to continue to have a well-rounded and very active and supportive group of professionals from tourism, preservation, cultural heritage, and higher education that continues to support our mission.



Please contact us:

www.BlueRidgeHeritage.com

info@blueridgeheritage.com

828-298-5330 | 828-298-9507 FAX

195 Hemphill Knob Road
Asheville, NC 28805