

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION



INTRODUCTION TO THE MANAGEMENT PLAN OF THE BLUE RIDGE NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA

NATIONAL HERITAGE AREAS: A BRIEFING

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. The National Park Service (NPS) controls access to a National Heritage Area designation. When created in 1916, the NPS was identified as the federal agency responsible for preserving nationally significant natural and historic resources for present and future generations. National Heritage Areas are one way in which the Park Service can carry out this mission by assisting the voluntary efforts of citizens to protect a local cultural landscape without governmental acquisition of the land itself. Once designated, National Heritage Areas are eligible for NPS support, including funding, legal guidance, technical assistance, and some administrative services.

Although Congress establishes National Heritage Areas, a commission, nonprofit group, or other organization comprised of local citizens usually manages them. National Heritage Areas, as organizations, are locally governed institutions that encourage residents, government agencies, non-profit groups, and private partners to join together in planning and implementing programs that preserve and celebrate America's defining landscapes. The National Heritage Areas seek near-term and long-term solutions to their conservation and

development challenges by fostering relationships among regional stakeholders and encouraging them to work collaboratively to achieve shared goals.

A National Heritage Area designation does not affect property ownership or use of land. Programs and projects are created through voluntary efforts coordinated by the management organization of each National Heritage Area. Existing local, state, and national parks are commonly included and actively partner in National Heritage Area activities.

As of this writing, there are 37 National Heritage Areas in the United States. Each one is unique, and the experiences they offer are very diverse. The areas possess a variety of resources and are at different stages of implementing plans for such efforts as scenic byways, greenways, heritage trails, interpretive and educational programs, festivals, and rehabilitation of historic buildings and districts. However, they share a common challenge: to match, with non-federal funds, the appropriations they receive from Congress, and to use those combined resources to "tell America's story".

FORMATION OF THE BLUE RIDGE NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA & ITS MISSION

Driven primarily by AdvantageWest Economic Development Group and HandMade in America, a group of committed individuals formulated and presented to the NPS a feasibility study and plan (June 2002) justifying reasons for and documenting benefits to the region and the nation at large of National Heritage Area status for the Western North Carolina mountains. The Blue Ridge National Heritage Area (BRNHA) received its formal designation in November 2003 (Section 140 of P.L. 108-108, the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area Act of 2003), making it the nation's 24th National Heritage Area. The designated area is comprised of 25 counties, encompassing Alleghany, Ashe, Avery,

Buncombe, Burke, Caldwell, Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Haywood, Henderson, Jackson, McDowell, Macon, Madison, Mitchell, Polk, Rutherford, Surry, Swain, Transylvania, Watauga, Wilkes, Yadkin and Yancey, and the Qualla Boundary. The area covers approximately 10,000 square miles and is home to more than a million people. It is bordered by the states of Virginia, Tennessee, Georgia and South Carolina. Figure 1-1 depicts the geographic location of the BRNHA and its constituent counties.

Soon after the designation a Board was established, bylaws drafted, 501(c)3 non-profit status obtained, and an Executive Director hired. A mission statement was drafted that reads, “the mission of the BRNHA is to protect, preserve, interpret and develop the unique natural, historical and cultural resources of Western North Carolina for the benefit of present and future generations, and in so doing to stimulate increased economic opportunity in the region.” Since its

The mission of the BRNHA is to protect, preserve, interpret and develop the unique natural, historical and cultural resources of Western North Carolina for the benefit of present and future generations, and in so doing to stimulate increased economic opportunity in the region.

inception, the BRNHA has been aggressively pursuing this mission. By statute and NPS administrative requirement, the BRNHA is required to develop an NPS approved formal management plan to guide its efforts over the next 10 years.

PURPOSE & NEED FOR THE MANAGEMENT PLAN

The purpose of this management plan is to chart a course of action and provide meaningful reference materials for the BRNHA as it invests effort and resources from 2008 to 2018 in pursuit of its mission to protect, interpret, and develop heritage resources in Western North Carolina. The management plan must meet informational needs of the BRNHA from both an organizational and an operational perspective while remaining consistent with federal authorizing legislation for National Heritage Areas and NPS administrative requirements.

Organizationally, this plan outlines a preferred management structure and processes that can be utilized to help ensure that over the next 10 years BRNHA remains true to its mission, responsive to both opportunities and threats affecting heritage resources, and engaged with the public and the myriad of government and private organizations in the region. Operationally, this plan establishes goals and objectives and recommends specific programmatic strategies and actions reflective of those that should position BRNHA for fulfillment of its mission.

This plan meets the stipulations of the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area Act of 2003 (P.L. 108-108), which states that the management plan shall:

- (A) present comprehensive recommendations and strategies for the conservation, funding, management, and development of the Heritage Area, and
- (B) identify existing and potential sources of Federal and non-Federal funding for such conservation, funding, management and development; and
- (C) include
 - (i) an inventory of the cultural, historical, natural and recreational resources of the Heritage Area, including a list of property that
 - (I) relates to the purposes of the Heritage Area; and
 - (II) should be conserved, restored, managed, developed, or maintained because of the significance of the property;
 - (ii) a program of strategies and actions for the implementation of the Management Plan that identifies the roles of agencies and organizations that are involved in such implementation;
 - (iii) an interpretive and educational plan for the Heritage Area;
 - (iv) a recommendation of policies for resource management and protection that develop

intragovernmental cooperative agreements to manage and protect the Heritage Area's resources; and

(v) an analysis of the ways in which Federal, State, and local programs may best be coordinated to promote the purposes of the Act.

This plan meets NPS administrative requirements by:

- integrating an Environmental Assessment (EA) that complies with National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requirements;
- describing the chronology of the planning process undertaken, which includes public participation;
- describing how the BRNHA will coordinate its efforts with other parks in the region; and
- referencing other important local and regional planning initiatives of which the BRNHA should be aware.

With this completed and approved management plan, the BRNHA is well equipped to move forward on multiple fronts and make an effective, long lasting contribution to heritage based economic development, preservation of those heritage resources that make Western North Carolina so unique, and to educating residents and tourists alike about the special cultural and landscape values of our mountain region.

THE MANAGEMENT PLANNING PROCESS

This planning document represents the culmination of a two year planning process that solicited, obtained, and has made extensive use of public, private, and government involvement. Specifically, the planning process has involved the direct collaboration of:

- BRNHA Board and Staff
- National Park Service
- NC Department of Commerce - Division of Film, Sports, and Tourism Development
- 26 Local Heritage Councils representing the Qualla Boundary and each county in the BRNHA
- Eight federal and state government agencies
- Five regional councils of government
- Eastern Band of the Cherokee Nation
- Western Carolina University
- Equinox Environmental, a private for-profit professional environmental consulting firm

The planning process has been undertaken in two distinct phases.

Phase I

The first phase involved the collaboration of BRNHA, Western Carolina University, and the NC Department of Commerce in creating Local Heritage Councils on the Qualla Boundary and in each of the 25 counties in the Heritage Area. The local councils were built from a base of volunteers representing various civic, government, non-profit, and private organizations who recognize the value to their communities of heritage resources. The councils were formed to decentralize the management of the BRNHA, provide a reliable link to local communities, and to supply locally driven energy and direction. In that regard, the councils were tasked to formulate heritage development plans that outlined ways in which their communities'

heritage resources could be preserved, interpreted, and developed in a manner that would stimulate economic opportunity in the region. The councils were also tasked to develop a list of heritage resources as a contribution to the heritage resource inventory required by the authorizing legislation. These heritage development plans are currently accessible via the BRNHA website (www.blueridgeheritage.com). Heritage council members are acknowledged in Appendix 3. The local heritage development plans formulated in this first phase furnished a substantial amount of data and information upon which the second phase of the planning effort was built.

Phase II

Equinox Environmental Consultation and Design, Inc. (Equinox) of Asheville, NC was contracted by the BRNHA in January 2007 to serve as its technical consultant and direct the second phase of the planning process. The second phase involved: a) finalizing the heritage resource inventory; b) assembling important reference materials such as other plans and efforts being undertaken in the region and lists of potential partners; c) integrating the requisite EA into the management planning process; and d) constructing the final document.

First, a 16 member interdisciplinary team (IDT) was assembled comprised of resource management professionals from federal and state agencies and community planners from the state and local councils of government with responsibilities to county and municipal governments in the region. IDT members are acknowledged in Table 6-1. The role of IDT members was threefold: a) review and provide perspective and feedback on pertinent materials generated through the development of the Management Plan and EA; b) initiate the scoping process within their respective organizations for notices about issues raised through the EA and to funnel comments generated in their organizations back to Equinox; and c) provide access to data (as requested and if applicable) for the heritage resource inventory. Three IDT meetings were held between January and July 2007. The IDT was also tasked with reviewing a final draft of the BRNHA Management Plan and EA in the fall of 2007.

From February to April 2007, scoping notices were broadcast to the public and to different agencies in the region informing them that the management plan was being undertaken and that different sections of the plan in draft form would be available for review as they were being constructed. The notices also provided a prospective timeline of the planning process and invited interested parties to provide comments about issues of concern. Notices were distributed via six regional newspapers, through use of IDT members, and through use of the BRNHA website. Comments were collected and stored for the administrative record. Written or verbal responses were given to those who commented.

During this time period, a screening of existing heritage development plans was performed to refine the heritage resource inventory such that it would fit the five heritage themes upon which BRNHA is focused. Additional resource data were compiled as deemed appropriate. Data were processed into information and maps created to facilitate ease of analysis in the EA and to help display the information in a useful context for the Board and Staff of the BRNHA and its existing and potential future partners.

A fourth major component of the planning process involved defining BRNHA's current management approach, constructing four different management alternatives, and assessing their potential impacts to the natural, cultural, recreational, and socio-economic environment of Western North Carolina. Each of the alternatives could theoretically serve as the overarching approach to guide BRNHA's efforts over the next 10 years. From this EA, an environmentally preferred approach to management was identified. More importantly, the process of undertaking this assessment revealed both strengths and shortcomings in each alternative, which was meaningful to the construction of the ultimate management approach selected by the Board. The selected approach to management of the BRNHA is described in Chapter 2.

The fifth and final major undertaking in this planning process involved developing the other sections of the plan that are needed to meet legislative and administrative requirements and compiling the information accurately and in an organized, attractive, and

useful format. A final draft plan was submitted to the public; IDT; and Board, Staff, and Executive Director in November 2007 for final comments. Comments were taken for 30 days and on December 22, 2007 the comment period was closed. Comments and planner responses to those comments are compiled in Appendix 4. No substantive changes to the plan were necessary due to the comments received.

ORGANIZATION OF THE PLANNING DOCUMENT

This is a very large and potentially cumbersome planning document. An extraordinary amount of meaningful information is presented. The organization of chapters as presented is intentional with the purpose of facilitating easier use.

Chapter 2 is essentially the management plan. It outlines the organizational structure, goals and objectives, and a number of potential strategies and actions that BRNHA has selected to guide its efforts over the next 10 years. This is the management approach that BRNHA Board and Staff have selected, after subjecting it and four other possible management approaches to an EA. It is expected that this chapter will get the most regular use by those charged with managing the Heritage Area.

Chapters 3 and 4 describe the Heritage Area environment. In addition to establishing baseline knowledge that was needed for EA purposes, these chapters should prove valuable as long term reference materials to anyone formulating any number of ideas to help accomplish and track the progress of heritage preservation, interpretation or development goals. Chapter 5 describes other planning initiatives. Information presented in that chapter was also instrumental in the analyses of potential environmental consequences of the five management alternatives explored in the EA. More than that, it should prove useful in understanding who is doing what where in regards to the five heritage themes and what other planning efforts will be needed in the coming years. Good project ideas and action items should materialize from periodic review of Chapters 3 - 5.

The EA is presented in Chapter 6. The information presented is somewhat complex but well worth the effort to read and periodically review by anyone with responsibility of managing the Heritage Area. The EA process was extremely valuable in determining a more effective management approach of heritage resources in Western North Carolina.

Chapter 7 provides an organizational chart that reflects the organizational structure described in Chapter 2. More detail on the role and function of different partners accompanies this chart. Appendix 3 lists a host of existing partners who have cooperated with BRNHA in the past and potentially future partners who could help on heritage related activities in coming years. Together, this amount of information would have unnecessarily competed with the management approach described in the second chapter and therefore is not presented in Chapter 2. Chapters 8 and 9 provide a business plan and education plan respectively.

A comprehensive list of references utilized in the formulation of this planning document is provided at the end of this document. It includes references cited and those not cited but that still played a role in the conception of ideas and analyses.

Figure 1-1
The Blue Ridge National Heritage Area

