

National Heritage Area Feasibility Study Process

Frequently Asked Questions

How does my region become a National Heritage Area?

National Heritage Area (NHA) designation begins with a grassroots, community-driven process called a “feasibility study,” rather than with an application or a nomination. This is an exciting process that examines a region’s history and resources in depth and also provides a strong foundation for eventual success as a National Heritage Area.

Ultimately, it is the United States Congress that designates regions of the country as National Heritage Areas. The National Park Service, as the federal body charged with managing the National Heritage Areas program, testifies at the request of Congress as to whether or not a region has the resources, national importance, and local financial and organizational capacity to carry out the responsibilities that come with designation.

This sounds like an interesting program, what should we do to get started?

When the residents of a region come together to consider whether designation as a National Heritage Area (NHA) is appropriate, there are certain key questions that they should discuss. These might include:

- What is nationally important about our region and how do we want to share our unique history, culture and landscape with others?
- Are there documented historic, cultural and natural resources that are associated with a nationally important story?
- What stories, themes or places unite the region?
- Are other groups in the region working on a similar idea and how might we pool our resources?
- Is National Heritage Area designation the right strategy to achieve the goals and outcomes desired by residents?
- Are we ready to begin exploring the feasibility of seeking the national heritage area designation for our region?
- Is it realistic at this point to seek designation - do we have or can we obtain Congressional support and local support and funding to carry out the responsibilities associated with designation?

Upon completion of a feasibility study, some regions may discover that National Heritage Area designation is not the right strategy for the future goals they have in mind. Alternately, a community may decide that though NHA designation is appropriate, it is not the best approach *at this time* because all the necessary elements are not yet in place to ensure success. A region may thus choose to spend additional time building partnerships and community support before ultimately seeking recognition through Congress.

What is a Feasibility Study?

A feasibility study is a report that documents the processes undertaken by the residents of a region to determine whether their landscape has the distinctive resources associated with a nationally important story and local capacity necessary for designation as a National Heritage

Area. It examines whether authorization as a NHA is an appropriate strategy for achieving a region's resource conservation, education, recreation, and economic development goals. The feasibility study process explores a number of important factors that inform whether national designation is the best way to achieve a region's conservation, education, recreation, and economic development goals; it also provides Congress with information regarding the appropriateness of designating the landscape as an NHA.

Who leads the National Heritage Area Feasibility Study process?

In some cases, Congress directs NPS to conduct a feasibility study in conjunction with local participants. In most cases, though, supporters of the NHA work within the region to develop the study, with the NPS serving in an advisory capacity.

There is no one formula for successfully completing a study process. When Congress directs the NPS to undertake a study, a team will work with residents as they determine whether National Heritage Area designation is an appropriate strategy. Funds for this approach are allocated directly by the National Park Service and made available as the budget process allows – which can take a number of years.

In other cases, a local non-profit may take the lead in reaching out to stakeholders. The NPS offers guidance, but does not provide funding to these efforts. A state or local government can also facilitate planning and public involvement, with NPS guidance but, once again, without the possibility of financial support from the agency. However, NPS strongly recommends frequent contact with staff people at the park unit (if applicable), regional office and national office level – NHA experts at NPS will help make the study process more understandable and useful for you.

How are National Heritage Area Feasibility Studies funded?

As noted above, funds for the feasibility process can come from a variety of sources. In some cases, Congress will pass a bill directing NPS to complete a study. Under these circumstances, resources are made available as the budget process allows.

If a study is undertaken by an entity other than the NPS, funding is often obtained through state or local government, universities or private foundations. In these cases, the NPS provides guidance, but not direct support to interested communities. Partner organizations can assist with key pieces of the study process, such as resource inventories and interpretive themes. In this way, feasibility studies can serve as a partnership-building process that increases local buy-in and reduces costs.

How do we figure out the main nationally important story and themes of the region?

Every region is filled with great stories. How do you focus on just a few without ignoring others?

While it may be difficult, the identification of a nationally important story (the specific event, movement, cultural group, etc. that is of national importance) and theme development process provides a unique opportunity to think about the physical, cultural and even emotional connections between the places, stories and people that make your region special. One possible starting point is to ask the questions, "What makes this landscape different from similar or adjacent regions?" "Why did this happen here as opposed to other places?" "How does our

story uniquely fit in with America's story?" Sometimes it is helpful to identify whether the nationally important story and associated themes that surface are locally, regionally or nationally distinctive. If they are primarily local or regional, there may be other ways to recognize these stories rather than through National Heritage Area designation.

Once you've begun to focus in on your region's nationally important story, begin to think about how the unique experiences of your place contributed to or possibly reflect more universal ideas or beliefs. Cultural traditions, social movements, major events and historical periods can all contribute to the development of themes, but for the identification of a nationally important story try to dig down more and ask "how did this idea express itself in this place and why?" If the industrial revolution shaped your region, ask how and why and to what impact? If a cultural group defines your landscape, think about how unique folkways developed and how they continue to be significant nationally.

Engaging regional stakeholders (including residents, businesses, nonprofits, Tribes, and local, state, and federal government) in the process is vital. For example, engaging stakeholders in workshops in which people identify what about their region is nationally distinctive, or circulating resource inventories, or interviewing people at local events are ways to capture the public's perspective about the region's themes and stories. Exploring the stories of your place and developing the themes that reflect a region's culture and history should be as open and inclusive a dialogue as possible. But remember, while there may be many viable options, the statement of national importance and associated themes ultimately chosen should be of **national importance** and be well supported by a collection of historic, cultural, and natural resources

How is a boundary for a National Heritage Area identified?

County or state boundaries, watershed boundaries, and geographic (river or canal corridor, for examples) are some ways to define your boundaries. However, most historic events do not fall within existing municipal or state lines. Ideally, your nationally important story, themes, resource inventory, and opportunities for conservation, recreation, and education should determine which places to include in your National Heritage Area boundary.

Remember that the feasibility study process provides an opportunity to bring communities together across jurisdictions and connect them based upon a shared heritage, resources, and opportunities. It is useful to question why a jurisdiction might want or not want to be included and to pursue their participation if inclusion would help to tell your nationally important story and associated themes. The most appropriate boundaries confirm and illustrate your national importance, themes, and resources.

Who should we reach out to in the community?

Congress and the National Park Service look closely to see how the study process engaged stakeholders (including residents, businesses, nonprofits, Tribes, and local, state, and federal government) of the region. No matter how you choose to complete the study process, it is important to include as many voices and perspectives as possible. This should be one of the overarching goals of any outreach strategy. Organizations, local and state government, business, educational institutions and private citizens should be given opportunities to share

their views. Though this may take time, it will pay dividends in partnership development and public support – two critical factors for success later on should designation occur.

Throughout the feasibility study process, organizers should document all public involvement. Public involvement can include meetings, workshops, newsletters, open houses, mailings, websites, booths, presentations, press releases, newspaper articles, etc. It is important for Congress and the NPS to know that outreach took place, but it is even more important for all the residents of a region to know that they were involved in the process. NHA designation should not come as a surprise to local communities and government bodies.

Consider documenting the following: How many people attended? What were their comments? Was there follow-up?

Who is “in charge” of a National Heritage Area?

During the feasibility study process, the study team should assess the best organization to coordinate heritage area activities. Possible coordinating entities include a nonprofit organization, an alliance of organizations, a coalition, a local or a state government. If a designation bill is introduced in Congress, it will identify a “local coordinating entity.” This body is authorized to manage the federal funding allocated to carry out the purposes of the legislation.

It is important to consider carefully different options for their local coordinating entity. Think beyond the first few organizations or bodies that come to mind. Engage as many stakeholders as possible in the feasibility study process, in order to get a diverse scope of ideas for management and coordination of your National Heritage Area. Do they all have a passion for the region, or a commitment to community well-being? Do they have the financial and organizational capacity to coordinate a heritage area? Do boards have diverse skill sets, marketing savvy, etc? Are they well-connected people in the area?

What kind of financial and human resources are necessary for success?

When considering National Heritage Area designation, one of the critical components is demonstrated support and commitment from a wide variety of partners. Support comes in all forms – staff time, supplies, money, expertise, etc. In order to demonstrate support and commitment, the NPS asks regions to complete a “conceptual financial plan” as part of the feasibility study process, and include letters outlining support and commitments from stakeholders. The conceptual financial plan is an important document; it assigns a financial value to the commitments made verbally and in letters of support associated with the study. Not only does it demonstrate commitment from stakeholders, it also shows that should designation occur and limited federal funds become available (approximately \$150,000 per year during management planning and \$300,000 annually upon approval of the management plan, if funding is available), the proposed coordinating entity already has a plan in place for matching these funds as required by law.

After designation, a NHA needs to hit the ground running in order to complete its legislated requirements - including preparation of a management plan – usually within three years. A well-thought out financial plan is one of the best ways to prepare your region for success. A financial plan can also enable the region to begin implementing the ideas described in the study while awaiting national designation.

What makes a national designation different from a state or local designation?

Several states have state-legislated and/or funded programs, including Pennsylvania, Maryland, and New York. Some local areas give themselves a heritage area designation as a way to identify for visitors and residents the stories that make their region unique.

National designation occurs through an Act of Congress. If achieved, it requires the region to assume new responsibilities, including the development and implementation of a management plan, and operation under performance and accountability standards connected with the receipt of Federal funds.

We have documented our process, determined that designation is the right approach and have begun writing a report, what do we do next?

Throughout the feasibility study process, it is important to keep in close contact with National Park Service National Heritage Area program staff in your region and Washington D.C. NPS staff provide input and guidance along the way and can also respond to questions specific about the *National Heritage Area Feasibility Study Guidelines* and evaluation criteria.

As a study process is winding down, share a draft study containing your findings concerning feasibility with the NPS NHA Program Office in your region and in Washington D.C. They can review and comment on the work done so far and provide input for additional steps to putting a full study document together.

The National Heritage Area Program Office in Washington D.C. coordinates a formal review process of heritage area studies to determine if the feasibility study process is followed and the 10 evaluation criteria are met. The review process includes NPS subject matter experts from the National Register of Historic Places, National Historic Landmarks, Planning, Interpretation, and other programs.