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# THE NATIONAL HERITAGE AREAS ACT: NOW IS THE TIME

👤 Brenda Barrett 📅 March 3, 2021

The first [National Heritage Area \(NHA\)](#) was designated almost thirty-five years ago and today that number has grown to 55 congressionally designated areas. Built on the nationally important cultural and natural resources of a region, knit together by storytelling and multiple partnerships, incentivized by the National Park Service (NPS) brand and limited grant assistance, and locally managed, it is no wonder that the idea is still extremely popular. But while [evaluations](#) undertaken by the NPS have demonstrated the idea's success and new areas are clamoring to be recognized, official acknowledgement of NHAs as part of the NPS family has not been achieved, despite years of advocacy.

I suggest that the time is right to make this quest a reality and recognize NHAs as a legislatively authorized component part of the NPS. After all these years, why is now the time? Here are just a few good reasons:

- 1. Economic Recovery** – In this pandemic time, with the country suffering a severe economic slowdown, the federal government can turn to NHAs as a cost-effective strategy. They use sustainable practices and locally created partnership to rebuild communities drawing on their heritage of cultural and natural resources. NHAs can create a new economic platform based on heritage tourism and outdoor recreation that revitalizes regional economies and instills pride of place in residents.
- 2. Diversity, Equity and Inclusion** – NHAs can advance the new administration's commitment to these values by telling nationally important stories. These stories celebrate and reflect on the complexity of our national heritage mosaic, and can, at times, be challenging to share. Most importantly, the narrative is developed by the people on the ground, the people who live on the land. Read the [latest issue of Heart & Soul](#), the magazine of the Alliance of National Heritage Areas, to discover the diverse histories interpreted in NHAs.
- 3. Working at a Landscape Scale** – To address the threat of climate change and loss of biodiversity, the new administration has signed on to the ambitious conservation goal to protect 30 percent of US lands and coastal areas by 2030. Given the scope of this initiative, it cannot be achieved without engaging multiple partners and private landowners in the effort. While they do not directly undertake land conservation, NHAs have pioneered effective partnership models that provide stewardship outcomes. NHAs have also been shown to increase a regional sense of place and sense of pride as well as an understanding of the need for connectivity and a framework for landscape scale conservation.

These reasons and many more are why now is the time to make NHAs part of the National Park Service. For one thing, the political climate has never been more promising. In 2020, the House passed *The National Heritage Area Act of 2020* (H.R. 1049) although the bill failed to reach a vote in the Senate. Already, in 2021, the House passed the act again as part of the large public lands bill HR 803. The program has always had bipartisan support and the current make up the Senates augers well for the passage of the act in this new session. The key now is making this a priority for the Department of Interior's legislative agenda.

In the past, when asked to testify on a request to designate a new individual NHA, the agency routinely stated *'...we recommend that the Committee defer action on this legislation until program legislation is enacted that establishes guidelines and a process for designation of national heritage areas.'* This necessity for program legislation has been the NPS's official position since the 1990s. In 2006, the recommendation for crafting such legislation was the centerpiece of the National Park System Advisory report, *Charting a Future for National Heritage Areas* and other NPS white papers. All reports point out the benefits NHAs offer to the NPS: conserving and interpreting the landscape around park units, telling underrepresented stories in the voice of the community, and doing so with support and assistance of the people who live in the landscape. Sara Capen, the President of the [Alliance of National Heritage Areas](#), put it this way:

*"There are few federal programs that epitomize the democratic principles our nation was built on like National Heritage Areas. National Heritage Areas truly are of the people, by the people, and for the people. The National Heritage Area Act will establish a system of National Heritage Areas as an integral part of the National Park Service, ensuring uniform standards for the way NHA's are designated, managed, and assessed, and provide Congress with an enhanced ability to conduct oversight of the program."*

Since the work of NHAs aligns so well with the goals of the new administration and Congressional interest is high, now is the time for the NPS, Alliance of National Heritage Areas (ANHA) and other supporters to make history and push the legislation over the finish line!