



The fishing and cannery industries serving world-wide markets have strongly influenced the heritage of the region

1

Introduction and Background

WHY IS THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CONDUCTING THIS STUDY?

Congress has directed the National Park Service (NPS) to study the feasibility of designating the region at the mouth of the Columbia River as the Columbia-Pacific National Heritage Area. Congress took action at the request of residents in the region. In 2006, leaders from the lower Columbia, including elected officials from local governments in Oregon and Washington, formed a non-profit called “Destination: The Pacific.” This group’s mission was to promote a national heritage area at the mouth of the Columbia. In 2006 the Oregon and Washington congressional delegation introduced a bill to study this proposal. Congress passed this bill into law in May 2008, as part of Public Law 110-229.

It is the responsibility of the NPS, by conducting this study objectively and rigorously, to determine whether designating a national heritage area at the mouth of the Columbia makes sense according to the criteria that Congress has set forth.

We describe these criteria and our findings in the paragraphs and chapters that follow.



Digging clams in Oysterville, c. 1960

WHAT IS A NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA?

A description of a national heritage area may be helpful.

In 2004, the NPS defined national heritage areas as:

“... regions ... acknowledged by Congress for their capacity to tell important stories about our nations. Continued use of national heritage areas by people whose traditions helped to share the landscape enhances their significance.”

NHAs started as a legislative experiment. That is to say, Congress did not begin by creating a national heritage area program but by designating individual national heritage areas, each with its own structure and purpose. The Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor was one of the first NHAs designated. Its story helps to illustrate what communities, Congress, and the NPS intended the “national heritage area” designation to do when it was first bestowed.

In the early 1980s, communities in Rhode Island and Massachusetts approached their congressional delegations seeking to create a national park along the Blackstone River. The Blackstone River was the cradle of the industrial revolution in North America. By the late 1970s, many of the mills and factories that lined the river were vacant and derelict. Communities along the river sought not only recognition for the role the area had played in national history but revitalization of their community. After studying the area, the NPS determined that the area was not suitable for national park designation. The NPS argued that there was



Leadbetter Point State Park

no role for federal land ownership or management. However, the NPS did feel that these areas represented a significant and distinctive part of the nation’s story.

In response to study recommendations, Congress chose to designate the area as the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor, later renamed the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor in recognition of the bill’s sponsor.

The designation made the area eligible for several years of funding and technical support from the NPS. Congress authorized an appointed commission to oversee funds and actions. The commission did not “manage” the area in the sense of managing land or regulating activities, because, as the Blackstone River’s first plan noted, “. . . *it was recognized [by Congress] that the potential of the National Heritage Corridor (NHC) must be achieved cooperatively, the Commission has no power to compel consistency with vision. It cannot own or manage land, or regulate or enforce mandates.*”

Between 1984 and 2009, Congress created 49 national heritage areas including places such as the National Coal Heritage Area in West Virginia, America’s Agricultural Partnership (Silos and Smokestacks) in Northeast Iowa, and the Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area in Pennsylvania. National heritage areas include cities Detroit, Lansing, and Flint, Michigan (part of the Motor Cities Heritage area), and rural regions such as the San Luis Valley in Colorado.

HOW WILL THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE DECIDE WHETHER TO RECOMMEND DESIGNATION OF THE COLUMBIA-PACIFIC NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA?

In the bill directing the NPS to conduct this study, Congress defined the criteria that NPS should use to assess the area. In plain language, they can be expressed as follows:

Is the Area Nationally Important? Does the area at the mouth of the Columbia tell us something important about the story of our nation, including the stories of the nations that came before us? Is it distinctive—does it have a history you can’t find in other places?

Is it Still There? Can you see the area’s history, culture, and traditions in its buildings and public works, its economy, landscapes, and people? Are people still working on the water, in the woods, or in other ways staying connected to their traditions? This criterion does not ask if the area is frozen in time, but if residents have kept the area’s distinctive identity alive into the 21st century.

Can People Experience It? Are there public spaces, parks, buildings, activities or other ways that allow both residents and visitors opportunities to experience the area?



Are There Opportunities to Do Good Work?

If federal designation and funds were invested, could they help the region's communities keep its distinctive identity alive?

Who is Going to Run the National Heritage Area? Are They Capable?

National heritage areas are public-private partnerships. They are not run by the federal government but by non-profit organizations called coordinating entities. The coordinating entity has several responsibilities including attracting investment to match the federal investment and collaborating with partners in the designated area. Increasingly, Congress is also expecting coordinating entities to have the capacity to develop a self-sustaining NHA program. The federal investment is seen as seed money to temporarily assist the program while the coordinating entity builds the program's capacity to become self-sufficient.

NPS has also begun to ask national heritage areas to measure their performance with federal funds. NPS has engaged the non-profit Center for Park Management to work with national heritage areas to develop ways to measure performance.

ShoreBank Enterprise Cascadia (SBEC) is proposed as the coordinating entity for the proposed Columbia-Pacific National Heritage Area. SBEC is a 501(c)(3) non-profit community development financial institution (CDFI). To evaluate SBEC's ability to serve

as the coordinating entity, we asked: Do they have a track record of conducting projects appropriate for a national heritage area? Can they collaborate? Do they have the resources and ability to create a self-sufficient program? Can they measure performance?

What Should the Boundary Be? Given the features that make the area distinctive, what should the boundary be? Should it be determined by political boundaries and physical features like drainage basins and divides? Should it be influenced by how people relate to each other today, by modern social ties, market towns, and cooperation? What do residents think?

Do People Support Designation of a National Heritage Area? NHAs are appropriate only if they enjoy widespread support and involvement.