

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-centered process called a “feasibility study,” rather than with an application or a questionnaire. 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, frequently testifies as to whether or not a region has the resources 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 distinctive about our region and how do we want to share our unique history, culture and landscape with others?
- Are other groups in the region working on a similar idea and how might we pool our resources?
- What stories, themes or places unite the region?
- 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 the local support, funding, et cetera 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 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 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, preservation and economic development goals; it also provides Congress with information regarding the appropriateness of designating the landscape as an NHA.

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.

Who organizes the process and compiles what we find?

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. A list of contacts is available at www.nps.gov/history/heritageareas/CNTC/INDEX.HTM.

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 material support to interested communities. Partners can provide key pieces, such as inventories. 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 stories or “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 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 and nowhere else?” “How does our story uniquely fit in with America’s story?” Sometimes it is helpful to identify whether the 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 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 be themes, but 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 cultural traditions, such as food, language and dress, define your place, think about how these unique folkways developed and how they continue to be significant nationally.

Engaging the residents of the region in this process is vital. For example, providing public meetings at which you ask attendees to identify what about their region they feel is distinctive, or circulating surveys 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, those themes ultimately chosen should highlight the region’s **nationally** important stories and sites. Examples of theme studies from previous studies can be found at www.nps.gov/history/heritageareas/FAQ/plans.htm

How do themes related to boundaries?

County or state boundaries, watershed boundaries, and geographic (river or canal corridor, for examples) are some ways to define your boundaries. Most historic events do not fall within existing municipal or state lines. Ideally, your themes should determine which towns, cities, counties to include in your National Heritage Area. Remember that the feasibility study process provides an opportunity to bring communities together across jurisdictions and connect them based upon a shared heritage, history, and sense of place. 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 stories. The most appropriate boundaries confirm and illustrate your themes, whether they are geographically or historically based.

Who should we reach out to in the community?

Congress and the National Park Service look closely to see how the study process engaged residents 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. How many people attended public meetings? What were their comments? Was there follow-up? 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.

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

During the feasibility study process, residents decide on the best way to coordinate heritage area activities. This can be through a non-profit alliance, a loose confederation of interested individuals or a more formal local or state government body. 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 for residents of a region to consider carefully when considering different options for their local coordinating entity. Think beyond the first few organizations or bodies that come to mind. Engage as many people as possible in the feasibility study process, in order to get a diverse scope of ideas for management of your National Heritage Area. Do they all have a passion for the region, or a commitment to community well-being? Do boards have diverse skill sets, marketing savvy, etc? Are they well-connected people in the area? A few of these might be helpful, even if they’re too specific to be perfect in every case.

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 – time, supplies, money, expertise etc. In order to demonstrate this cooperation, the NPS asks regions to complete a “conceptual financial plan” as part of the feasibility study process. This important document 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, 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, New York, and Utah. 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 is determined by 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 representatives in your region of the country. NPS staff people provide input and guidance along the way and can also respond to questions specific to the draft feasibility study guidelines. As a study process is winding down, share a draft of the summary document containing your findings concerning feasibility with the NPS NHA regional coordinator. They, along with program office staff in Washington, can review and comment on the work done so far and provide input for additional steps to putting a full study document together. Don't hesitate to contact us!