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US Fish and Wildlife Service

Great Dismal Swamp National Heritage Area Feasibility Study

Newsletter | Updated 03/14/2025

STUDY BACKGROUND

The National Park Service (NPS) is studying the suitability and feasibility of designating a certain area as the Great Dismal Swamp National Heritage Area. Congress authorized the study in Public Law 117-339, which directs the Secretary of the Interior, through the National Park Service, to evaluate the area for potential designation as a national heritage area (NHA). Working collaboratively with local stakeholders, subject matter experts, and the public, the study team will evaluate public support for an NHA designation and a commitment from key constituents who have the ability to work in partnership to manage the national heritage area. At the completion of the study, the findings and any recommendations will be submitted to Congress for consideration.

A national heritage area is a place designated by Congress where natural, cultural, historic, and scenic 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 physical features that remain and the traditions that have evolved in them. Continued use of national heritage areas by people whose traditions helped to shape the landscape enhances their significance.

National heritage areas are lived-in landscapes in which an identified local coordinating entity collaborates with communities to determine how to make heritage relevant to local interests and needs. The National Park Service provides technical, planning, and limited financial assistance to national heritage areas. The National Park Service is a partner and advisor, leaving decision-making authority in the hands of local people and organizations. Currently, there are 62 designated national heritage areas in 36 states and territories across the country that support a diversity of conservation, recreation, education, and preservation activities. To learn more about national heritage areas and the national heritage area system, visit <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/heritageareas/index.htm>.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

A feasibility study provides analysis, documentation, and determinations on whether the landscape has the key resources associated with a nationally important story and the local support necessary for designation as a national heritage area. The feasibility study process explores multiple important factors informing whether national designation is a feasible way to achieve a region's conservation, education, recreation, and economic development goals. The study also provides Congress with information regarding the appropriateness of designating the area as a national heritage area.



Photo Credit: Rob Wood/US Fish and Wildlife Service

Congress directed that the Great Dismal Swamp National Heritage Area feasibility study area includes evaluation of the cities of Chesapeake, Norfolk, Portsmouth, and Suffolk, and the Isle of Wight County in the Commonwealth of Virginia and the counties of Camden, Currituck, Gates, and Pasquotank in the state of North Carolina. Other areas in the state of Virginia or North Carolina that are adjacent to the cities or counties mentioned above or that have heritage aspects similar to these areas may also be included in the feasibility study. The feasibility study will also assess the demonstrated support of the community, including businesses, residents, nonprofit organizations, and appropriate local, state, Tribal, and federal agencies.

STUDY PROCESS AND SCHEDULE

The National Park Service follows specific guidelines during the feasibility study to determine if a unique, nationally important story is being told in a particular study area. This story, or stories, should be visible on the lived-in landscape that can be experienced through the shared culture of those who call the Great Dismal Swamp area home. The study also documents public support for the designation of the national heritage area and whether an organization is poised to lead its management, if created. Community input is critical to completing this study. This feasibility study evaluates the following about the study area:



Photo Credit: US Fish and Wildlife Service

- Does the region have a collection of natural, cultural, and historic resources that, when linked together, help to tell a nationally important story?
 - What makes this area of southeast Virginia and northeast North Carolina nationally distinctive, and how does the study area contribute to or exemplify a distinctive aspect of America's national heritage?
 - What unique American stories are being told in the area, and why is the Great Dismal Swamp the area in which it is best to tell them?
 - Do opportunities exist for improving the quality of resources through conservation, recreation, and education?
- Is there an organization or a number of organizations that have the financial and organizational capacity to coordinate the management of a national heritage area at the local level?
 - Is there public support for a national heritage area designation and the proposed boundary?

Studies are typically completed within three years. The study began in August 2023 and is currently in its first year. Upon completion, a report will be submitted to Congress describing the study findings, recommendations from the Secretary of the Interior, and any correspondence received demonstrating support for or opposition to establishing the national heritage area. For more information on national heritage areas, please visit <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/heritageareas/index.htm>, or for more information on feasibility studies, visit <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/heritageareas/feasibility-studies.htm>.

HOW TO PARTICIPATE

We encourage you to learn more about the study process and share your ideas. Stay updated by visiting the study project website at <https://parkplanning.nps.gov/projectHome.cfm?projectID=119003>.

Send us your thoughts and comments during the comment period in any of the following ways:

ONLINE: Visit the web address above and click "Open for Comment."

BY PHONE: Contact Julie Bell (project manager) at 720-989-0282.

BY MAIL: Send your comments to:
National Park Service, Denver Service Center
Attn: Great Dismal Swamp NHA / Julie Bell
1 Federal Center, Building 50
P.O. Box 25287
Denver, CO 80225

VIRTUAL MEETING INFORMATION:

Date/Time	Details
Tuesday, March 25, 2025 4:00 p.m. – 5:30 p.m. ET	Teams meeting: https://tinyurl.com/2raeam4x To join by phone: 202-640-1187. Conference ID: 141776773#
Wednesday, March 26, 2025 12:00 p.m. – 1:30 p.m. ET	Teams meeting: https://tinyurl.com/hj5wcwmu To join by phone: 202-640-1187. Conference ID: 322440673#
Wednesday, March 26, 2025 6:00 p.m. – 7:30 p.m. ET	Teams meeting: https://tinyurl.com/mwzkkruy To join by phone: 202-640-1187. Conference ID: 958046832#

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Is a national heritage area a unit of the national park system? A national heritage area is not a unit of the national park system, nor is any of its land owned or managed by the National Park Service unless such land was previously set aside as a unit of the national park system. Designated by Congress, national heritage areas are managed by local coordinating entities that accomplish the goals of interpreting the heritage area history and traditions through partnerships with governments, organizations, businesses, and individuals.

Who designates an area to become a national heritage area? Only Congress may designate regions of the country as national heritage areas. However, the National Park Service may be requested by Congress to testify 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.

Why are feasibility studies important? National heritage area feasibility studies provide a means to inventory, assess, and document the nationally important resources and stories of a potential national heritage area. These studies examine tangible and intangible resources for what about them is unique, important, and/or endangered; what is underutilized; who is going to be involved; and what potential new opportunities can be created by establishing a national heritage area.

What makes a national designation different from a state or local designation? National designation occurs through an act of Congress. If achieved, the designation requires the management entity to assume new responsibilities, including developing and implementing a management plan and its operation under performance and accountability standards connected with the receipt of federal funds.

How do national heritage areas affect private property? Unlike national parks, the federal government does not own or manage all lands within a heritage area. A national heritage area designation will not infringe on private property rights. National heritage areas are lived-in landscapes and do not require property owners to allow access or use of their property to support the national heritage area. A designation also does not restrict private property owners from participating in any plans or modifications to their property.

Great Dismal Swamp

National Heritage Area Feasibility Study

Study Area Overview

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

