



## *Executive Summary*

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Maid of The Mist

## Introduction

Niagara Falls is a geological wonder that has been a world-renowned tourist attraction for 200 years. The Niagara River Gorge is an exceptionally scenic corridor, carved by the movement of the Falls due to erosion from its original location near Lewiston, New York, beginning over 10,000 years ago. Rich in natural and cultural resources, the Niagara Falls area has significant historical associations with Indians, early European exploration, the French and Indian War, the American Revolution, the War of 1812, and the Underground Railroad. The Falls have long been an important site for hydroelectric power and ancillary industries. Together, these elements have contributed to Niagara Falls' importance in the American imagination, as a national landmark and a symbol of the American conservation movement.

There are three National Historic Landmarks in the study area: the Adams Power Transformer House, in Niagara Falls, which is the birthplace of the modern hydroelectric power station; the Niagara Reservation, designed by landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted and considered the oldest state park in the country; and the Colonial Niagara Historic District, in Lewiston and Youngstown, which includes Old Fort Niagara.

With the extensive cultural and natural resources in the Niagara Region, there is a widespread belief that there is great potential for upgrading the area's offerings. A Niagara National Heritage Area designation is being explored locally as a way to heighten appreciation of the region, better preserve its natural and historic resources, improve coordination among existing programs and sites, and improve the quality of life and economy of the area. Local efforts in pursuit of these objectives are ongoing.

The study area, according to federal legislation authorizing the NHA feasibility study, is the “lands in Niagara County, New York, along and in the vicinity of the Niagara River.” It encompasses the Cities of Niagara Falls and North Tonawanda; the Towns of Porter, Lewiston, Niagara, and Wheatfield; and the Villages of Lewiston and Youngstown. A broader context area embraces the Canadian side of the Niagara River and Erie County, New York, communities bordering the Niagara River, namely Buffalo and Tonawanda.



Visitors to the Cave of the Winds

The Niagara Falls National Heritage Area Study Act (P.L. 107-256) outlines the criteria for evaluating the feasibility of the Niagara Falls Region to become a National Heritage Area. Analysis of the Niagara Falls Region in light of these criteria demonstrates that the area contains resources and represents themes that are distinctive aspects of America’s heritage.

In the process of researching for this study, four heritage themes interpreting the region have been identified:

1. Natural Phenomenon—Niagara Falls and the Niagara River Gorge are natural phenomena overwhelming in physical magnitude and deeply embedded in the popular consciousness;
2. Tourism and Recreation—Niagara Falls has been a leading international tourist attraction for 200 years, influencing the development of tourism and nature conservation in North America;
3. Power and Industry—Around 1895, Niagara Falls became the foremost source of hydroelectric power in North America, stimulating the development of innovative heavy industries in Niagara Falls and Buffalo;
4. Borderland/Border Crossing—The Niagara River area, a boundary between the United States and Canada, has played an important role in Indian culture, the French and English colonial struggle to control North America, the American Revolution, the War of 1812, and the Underground Railroad, and it reflects national differences and similarities between the two countries today.

The feasibility study examined three management alternatives: (1) Continuation of Current Practices; (2) National Heritage Area—Niagara Falls and Lower Niagara River; and (3) National Heritage Area—Niagara Falls and Network of Thematically Related Sites. Alternative 2 would establish a heritage area along the American side of the Niagara River from the rapids above the Falls to the river’s mouth at Lake Ontario. Alternative 3 would have as

its core the area described in Alternative 2, as well as a network of sites thematically related to Niagara Falls in Niagara and Erie Counties with possibilities for cooperation with related sites in Canada.

Three possible models for the national heritage area management entity are a state agency, a regional nonprofit organization or a federal commission. As a public body created by Congress, a federal commission can be effective at assembling a cross-section of public and private interests, raising the profile of the heritage area, and involving the National Park Service.

A state commission that could be an appropriate management entity would be the newly created Niagara River Greenway Commission, which has been established to develop a plan for a greenway stretching the length of the Niagara River, from Lake Erie to Lake Ontario. The State of New York Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation has expressed a preference that this commission be the management entity for a potential national heritage area.

A regional nonprofit organization tends to be most appropriate where a strong, broadly supported nonprofit regional heritage organization already exists or emerges through the planning process.

A national heritage area could enhance the quality of historical, cultural, and natural attractions in the Niagara Region and increase connections between them. Heritage area goals expressed in the planning process include: improving the visitor experience; strengthening the region's identity; increasing public awareness of local history and the need for preservation; encouraging research on local history; and improving the local economy.

There has been public interest in establishing a Niagara Falls National Heritage Area since 2000, when an array of local leaders met with National Park Service officials to discuss the concept. This interest has been related to a number of planning and heritage initiatives, including the Urban Design Project of the University of Buffalo, the Binational Niagara Tourism Alliance, and the Buffalo Niagara



Encampment re-enacted at Old Fort Niagara

Cultural Tourism Initiative; and efforts to redevelop and promote Niagara by the City of Niagara Falls, the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation, USA Niagara, and the Niagara Tourism and Convention Corporation.

This study includes an Environmental Assessment of possible impacts related to the three alternatives. This assessment finds that the potential impacts are not significant, although additional visitors staying over longer periods of time would contribute to the tourism economy and specific sites might receive more visitation.

The study includes an inventory of natural and cultural resources within the Niagara River study area. It should be noted that this inventory is not exhaustive, but is sufficient to determine that adequate resources are present to provide interpretive opportunities relating to the themes presented in this report. Should a Niagara National Heritage Area be authorized by Congress, a more thorough resource inventory would be completed when a plan for the heritage area is developed.

This report does not presently make findings regarding criterion 7 regarding the demonstration of commitments of the management entity, local governments and organizations, or for criterion 10 describing the proposed management entity. The public comment period will be used by the study

team to evaluate public support for one of the management entity alternatives described above and to ascertain commitments that may be pledged by governments and organizations to the management entity and the heritage area as a whole. Complete findings on these criteria will be formally documented for the study record. The next steps after publication of this draft report will include: public view of the draft study for 30 days subsequent to its release; a public meeting to obtain public comments; review of public comments by the study team; preparation of the final national heritage area feasibility study report; and transmittal of the report to the Secretary of the Interior who will make a recommendation to Congress.

