National Heritage Areas are places where natural, cultural, historic and scenic resources combine to form a cohesive, nationally important landscape arising from patterns of human activity shaped by geography. These patterns make National Heritage Areas representative of the American experience through the physical features that remain and the traditions that have evolved in them. These regions are acknowledged by Congress for their capacity to tell important stories about our nation. Continued use of National Heritage Areas by people whose traditions helped to shape the landscape enhances their significance.

National Heritage Areas are designated by Congress. Each National Heritage Area is governed by separate authorizing legislation and operates under provisions unique to its resources and desired goals. For an area to be considered for designation, certain key elements must be present. First and foremost, the landscape must have nationally distinctive natural, cultural, historic and scenic resources that, when linked together, tell a unique story about our country. A strong base of local, grassroots support is also essential, with the visible involvement and commitment of residents, government, community groups, non-profits and businesses. A feasibility study, conducted with extensive public involvement, is also strongly recommended. This document defines the region’s story, identifies significant assets and those local support for the initiative, interested communities, and can learn more about the feasibility study process at www.nps.gov/history/heritageareas or contact a National Park Service office in their region of the country. The Alliance of National Heritage Areas also offers information on heritage development at www.nationalheritageareas.com.

Recently designated National Heritage Areas have three years to develop a management plan, which, upon completion, must be approved by the Secretary of the Interior. The plan defines the mission, vision and goals of the National Heritage Area and outlines the strategies that the coordinating entity, partners and residents will use to achieve these objectives. Implementation of the plan rests in the hands of local citizens, officials, organizations and businesses, not the federal government.

How National Heritage Areas Work

National Heritage Areas expand on traditional approaches to resource stewardship by supporting large-scale, community-centered initiatives that connect local citizens to the preservation and planning process. Inaugurated in 1984, with the designation of the Illinois & Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor, the National Heritage Areas movement now encompasses 40 areas, ranging from factory towns and city neighborhoods to farmland and battlefields. By emphasizing tangible landscapes, National Heritage Areas have the ability to join historic preservation with the field of natural resource conservation and historic preservation. Committed to promoting and protecting the historic, cultural and natural assets of a region, National Heritage Areas play a vital role in maintaining both the physical character and cultural legacy of the United States.

In National Heritage Areas, residents, businesses, governments and non-profit organizations collaborate to promote conservation, community revitalization and economic development projects. Through the facilitation of a local coordinating entity, such as a private non-profit corporation or a public commission, residents come together to improve regional quality of life through the protection of shared cultural and natural resources. This cooperative approach allows National Heritage Areas to achieve both conservation and economic growth in ways that do not compromise local land use controls. Long-term National Heritage Areas work with the National Park Service and state and local agencies to further their core mission of natural and historic resource protection, while also leveraging financial and non-financial resources for all parties involved. Additionally, while a National Heritage Area designation is permanent, the role of the NPS can vary over time in response to the needs of the region and its residents.

A Partnership with the National Park Service

The National Park Service (NPS) provides technical, planning and limited financial assistance to National Heritage Areas. The NPS is a partner and advisor, leaving decision-making authority in the hands of local people and organizations. This partnership allows the NPS to further its core mission of natural and historic resource protection, while also leveraging financial and non-financial resources for all parties involved. Additionally, while a National Heritage Area designation is permanent, the role of the NPS can vary over time in response to the needs of the region and its residents.

National Trail, Affiliated Area or National Heritage Area. A list of National Heritage Areas can be found at www.nps.gov/history/heritageareas. To collect cancellation stamps every time they enter a unit of the National Park System, visitors may include hiking, biking and paddling or trips to museums and historic sites. Take a stroll through a historic downtown or visit a wildlife reserve; there is always something to do or to see in these unique places. Many National Heritage Areas also participate in the “Passport to your National Parks” program, which encourages visitors to collect cancellation stamps every time they enter a unit of the National Park System, National Trail, Affiliated Area or National Heritage Area. A list of National Heritage Area stamping locations is available at www.nps.gov/history/heritageareas.