

Why Are National Heritage Areas a Threat?



By Tom DeWeese

The Threat of National Heritage Areas And How to Stop Them: Part One

Proposals for new National Heritage Areas (NHA) are raising their ugly, land-grabbing heads again in Congress and they must be stopped. Here's why.

National Heritage Areas are one of the most despicable stealth land grabs in the nation. Americans love our history. We love preserving significant places that played an important role in the making of our unique nation. So, when we hear of a new plan in our area presented offering a chance to preserve some of our local heritage we are interested and even supportive.

But, in this day of massive government control over so much of our land, our economy, and our basic ability to live free lives, we must be cautious and look at the details of plans, no matter how innocent or well meaning they may seem.

National Heritage Areas are such a concern because they are sold to residents as simply a means to honor historic or cultural events that took place in a specific locale. We are told that they will preserve our culture and honor the past, that they will preserve battlefields where our forefathers fought and died for freedom, and that they will preserve birth places, homes, buildings, and hallowed grounds for posterity. Most importantly, we are assured that NHAs will help build tourism and boost local economies.

As described by property rights expert Leo Schwartz in 2007, in reality, NHAs are a massive sham, full of government pork, imposed by dishonest, anti-heritage, anti-private property elitism. Politicians, federal agencies, and private non-governmental organizations (NGOs) use the NHAs as a tool to gain votes, political power, and wealth. Moreover, these forces use the NHAs to impose politically-motivated restrictions on private land.

Wrote Schwartz, "In the 1980s, the National Park Service's record of abusive land acquisition practices had become a political nightmare. It needed a new approach to continue expanding its power. During the mid-1970s, several national land use control studies proposed innovative methods for federal control of private property. Applying these methods, NHAs were designed as a 'new kind of national park.' Seen as pork-laden gravy trains, many elected officials eagerly jumped aboard and the empire building continued."

It's worth noting that in 1928, then-Interior Secretary Hubert Work said National Park Service policy "is to eliminate all private holdings in our national parks". So, it is an honest question to ask, if NHAs are a new kind of national park, does that not mean that all of the private land located inside the massive federal boundaries established for the Heritage Area now federal park property?

Private organizations and planning groups are the actual recipients of most of these funds supposedly earmarked for the Heritage Area. These entities operate as the promoters of the NHA in partnership with the Park Service. Eventually they form a commission or a "managing entity" to enforce the "vision" to implement the Heritage Area.

Typically, such commissions consist of strictly ideological special interests groups. In the mix of these groups, one will find all of the usual suspects: environmental groups, planning groups, historic preservation groups – all with their own

private agendas, and all working behind the scenes, creating policy. The managing entity then sets up non-elected boards and regional councils to oversee policy inside the Heritage Area that stretches over numerous communities and counties.

In many cases, these groups actually form a compact with the Interior Department to determine the guidelines that will make up a land use management plan and the boundaries of the Heritage Area itself. The management plan is their goal for how they envision the territory inside the boundary to be run. The plan will include guidelines for development goals, energy use, bike trails, undefined conservation controls, tourism, and anything else they want to control.

Now, after the boundaries are drawn and the management plan has been approved by the Park Service, the management entity and its special interest groups are given the federal funds, typically a million dollars a year, or more, and told to spend that money to get the management plan enacted at the local level.

Here's how those special interest groups operate with those funds. They go to local county boards and city councils and announce that Congress has passed legislation designating the Heritage Area and that the community is now within those boundaries. They pull out maps and announce the properties they have identified to be significant for preservation.

However, as the managing entity, they don't have the power to make laws, but the local elected officials do and so the partnership is born, fed by the federal money. Now the managing entity will help create tools, legislation, guidelines, and whatever regulatory procedures are needed to make the management plan come into fruition.

Incredibly, proponents argue that National Heritage Areas do not influence local zoning or land-use planning. Yet, by definition this is precisely what they do. Found right in the

language of most Heritage Area legislation, the management entity is specifically directed to restore, preserve, *and manage anything and everything that is naturally, culturally, historically, and recreationally significant* to the Heritage Area.

The biggest threat to citizens living in a National Heritage Area is that it includes all the land in the designated boundary areas, not just recognized historic sites. This sweeping



mandate ensures that virtually every square inch of land within the boundaries is subject to the scrutiny of Park Service bureaucrats and their managing partners. That means private property, homes, businesses, and whole communities now come under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service.

Of course, as with so many other invasive planning schemes, we are always assured that these are local initiatives, and that these are something citizens want in order to bring an honorary federal designation to help drive tourism into their regions. That simply isn't the case. The private, non-governmental organizations and planning groups are the ones who want the plan because they get to enforce their private agendas and then get to live off the grant money as they implement them. As proponents talk about historic preservation inside the Heritage Area, one will also find the catchwords "resource conservation" and "resource stewardship," for example. Those are the clues to watch for.

It's all about control. Control of the land, control of resources, control of decision making. How does that fit with their stated purpose of preserving American culture – which, of course, was built on the ideals of free enterprise and

private property? In fact, it does the opposite by making government more powerful and dictatorial, and the property owners lose both the use and value of their property.

As I said above, proponents of NHAs also claim that they are “locally driven” projects. Nothing could be further from the truth. Landowners within the boundaries of proposed Heritage Areas are left in the dark throughout the entire process. For example, the final official map for the 2018 proposed Caddo Lakes National Heritage Area, revealing its official boundary, was not to be released to the public until after the actual Congressional legislation was passed!

In addition, Heritage Area proponents refuse to supply a simple written notification to property owners that their land will be inside the boundaries. Seemingly the Park Service and their management “partners” are not too eager to share all the good news with the local citizenry.

I have personally been in meetings with congressional staffers to discuss Heritage Areas. I asked them if they intended to notify affected landowners living inside the boundaries of a specific Heritage Area. They looked at me like I had two heads. They shuffled their feet and looked down at the table and then said, “There’s no way to do that.” “It would be too costly.” “How could we reach everyone?” I then suggested that they research a little known federal agency called the U.S. Postal Service. Mailmen appear to deliver to each and every one of the homes in the designated area every day.

The fact is, they don’t want to tell you in advance. You might object. And that would disrupt the “process.” No matter how noble a project may sound, alarm bells should go off when proponents want to enforce their vision in secret.

National Heritage Areas depend on federal tax dollars because they lack local interest— and not a single National Heritage Area has ever succeeded in attracting strong tourism

throughout their entire infinite lives. The federal money is the villain. If you just wanted to honor an area for its historic or cultural achievements, a simple resolution from Congress and a plaque at the county line could do that. The local Chamber of Commerce could then pick it up from there and build the expected tourism.

But of course, it's not about that. It's about control and money – lots of money in the pockets of private groups promoting their own agendas. Including taking control of people's private land.

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