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The Heritage Area Movement: Redefining Opportunities for Extension Professionals

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The Heritage Area Movement: Redefining Opportunities for Extension Professionals

Abstract

The heritage area movement is gaining momentum in the United States, offering new opportunities for Extension professionals to strengthen communities, build strong partnerships, and share the Extension story. This article reports on a case study examining the anatomy of a heritage area start-up, the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area (AFHA) in West Virginia and western Maryland. Results underscore the diversity of interest groups coalescing into the heritage area movement and illustrate the regional impact of Extension services. Issues raised by participants highlight many of the challenges heritage area projects face nationwide. Leadership opportunities for Extension professionals within the heritage area movement are discussed.

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Introduction

The heritage area movement is gaining momentum in the United States, offering new opportunities for Extension professionals to strengthen communities, build strong partnerships, and share the Extension story. There are now 23 officially designated National Heritage Areas (Figure 1) in the United States, and 37 proposals designating new National Heritage Areas are pending before Congress.

Figure 1.
National Heritage Area System



State heritage area programs are expanding at a rapid rate, with strong programs in Pennsylvania, Maryland, New York, and Utah having strong programs. Brenda Barrett, National Park Service heritage area coordinator, estimates there are more than 200 ad hoc heritage areas in the United States that have no "official" government designation (B. Barrett, personal communication, November 15, 2002).

Despite this rapid growth, there is little systematic data on the heritage area movement to assess its impact and benefit to communities and regional economies. Proponents also struggle to define what a heritage area is. The National Park Service, charged by Congress to support National Heritage Areas, works to designate areas where "natural, cultural, historic, and recreational resources combine for a cohesive, nationally-distinctive landscape arising from patterns of human activity shaped by geography" (Pillifant, 2002). For example, the Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area in the Pittsburgh area tells the story of how the steel industry contributed to the rise of the industrial revolution in America.

According to Mary Means (1999), heritage areas project the idea of a national park to the landscape or regional level and are implemented through partnerships among landowners, communities, businesses, and state and federal agencies. Perhaps one reason for the growth of the heritage area movement is that many constituent groups (recreation, tourism, historic preservation, economic development) find something of value in it.

Heritage areas are coordinated at a regional level, coalescing a diverse set of partners that have a common interest in the culture and history of the region. As such, the heritage area movement is redefining opportunities for Extension agencies. New organizational partnerships are emerging where Extension agencies, state parks, national forests, local businesses, and community festivals and events often form the cornerstone of heritage areas. In heritage area initiatives, Extension professionals are contributing by serving as catalysts, convenors, trainers, grant writers, governing body members, and communication experts. Extension engagement in heritage area initiatives has considerable potential to build the capacity of communities as well as enhance the legitimacy and visibility of Extension services.

This article describes potential opportunities for Extension professionals in the heritage area movement. This is accomplished by systematically examining the anatomy of a heritage area start-up, the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area (AFHA) in West Virginia and western Maryland. Here, Extension professionals have played a critical role in the growth and development of this heritage initiative. Case study research methods and participant evaluations are used to build a case history of the AFHA initiative as well as to create a descriptive profile of heritage area partners, their visions for the heritage area, personal and organizational benefits derived, and major issues and conflicts addressed in implementing the regional heritage area.

Methodology

Data for this research study were compiled using a case study research methodology (Yinn, 1989). Multiple sources of data were collected to control for possible biases (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Data sources included letters, agendas and minutes, administrative documents (reports, proposals, brochures), and newspaper clippings from AFHA stakeholder meetings. Organizational and participant profile data were collected in three evaluation surveys administered at AFHA membership meetings in November 2001, March 2002, and September 2002. A case history of the AFHA initiative was compiled from the sources collected. Evaluation surveys were coded to reflect major themes and then recoded into subthemes to reflect specific content (Strauss, 1987).

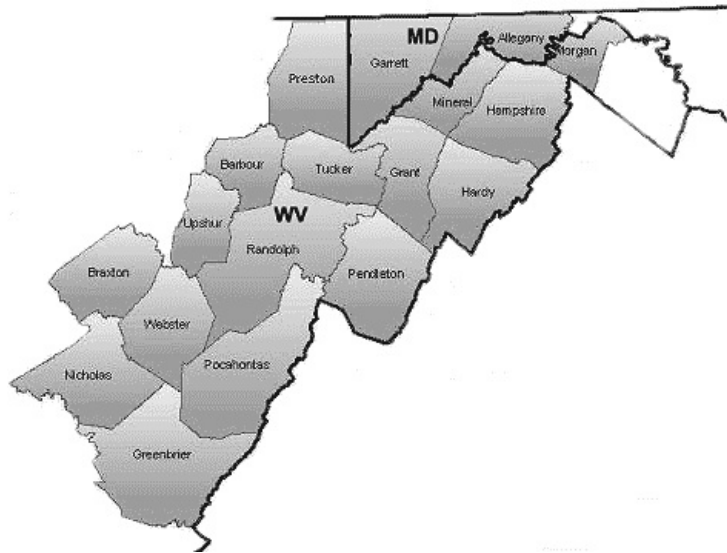
The Appalachian Forest Heritage Area

The Appalachian Forest Heritage Area (AFHA) has its roots in the long history of human use of the highland forests of West Virginia and western Maryland. For centuries, the forests of the Appalachian Mountains have sustained local settlers, provided raw materials for America's economic expansion, and inspired visitors. AFHA tells the story of this forest legacy and the mountain people who forged it.

The inspiration for the creation of a forest heritage area was born when the residents of Webster Springs, West Virginia proposed to develop a Woodchopper's Village, building upon the success of their Woodchopper's Festival, an annual celebration commemorating the rich forest heritage of the community. This community initiative was noticed by a team of forestry professors and Extension specialists at West Virginia University, who applied for a USDA Fund for Rural America grant. Thus, the idea of a regional forest heritage area was born. The USDA was looking for proposals that crossed state borders, so the forest heritage area was conceived as including the highland forest regions of West Virginia and western Maryland.

The Appalachian Forest Heritage Area initiative is now in the final year of the 4-year USDA Fund for Rural America grant. Although budgetary control during the initial grant period resides with the Extension Service and the Division of Forestry at West Virginia University, the implementation process and long-term management of the heritage area is taking the form of a community-based, collaborative decision process. Figure 2 shows the current geographic scale of the heritage area, including 15 counties in West Virginia and two counties in western Maryland. The Monongahela National Forest lies at the heart of the heritage area.

Figure 2.
The Appalachian Forest Heritage Area Region



The initial project workshop, held at Blackwater Falls State Park in November 2001, was attended by more than 90 people representing a diverse set of interests, including resource management agencies, economic development authorities, educators, tourism officials, Extension professionals, environmental groups, wood product firms, foresters, and community leaders. Participants grappled with the meaning of forest heritage and what the mission of the forest heritage area should be. An organizational structure was adopted for the implementation phase of the project consisting of:

- A Project Leadership Team of staff and co-investigators from West Virginia University and the Canaan Valley Institute (a regional, nonprofit conservation organization)
- A Steering Committee composed of Leadership Team members and active community and government partners
- Six Task Groups or subcommittees addressing such topical issues as asset mapping, interpretation, business and infrastructure, networking, organization and sustainability, and marketing.

Clearly, Extension professionals have played an integral role in the formation and development of the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area. From the initial formulating of the project idea through the success of the Fund For Rural America grant, Extension specialists and administrators at West Virginia University were indispensable to the overall success of the project. Extension agents from a number of West Virginia counties helped craft the definition and scope of the project at the initial visioning meeting.

AFHA Projects and Tasks

Over the first year, the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area adopted its formal name and refined its purpose and mission. Forest heritage was defined as "the ongoing story of how the forest shapes history and culture, and how ecology and human use have shaped the forest" (AFHA, 2002). The mission of the AFHA was refined to the following:

To work locally to conserve, develop, interpret, and promote a regional network of forest-based attractions and resources in the highlands of West Virginia and Maryland, for the enjoyment and appreciation of residents and visitors, in order to enhance economic and community development.

With the collective goal to develop a strategic plan for the fledgling heritage area, task groups met regularly, and two more general meetings were held in April 2002 and September 2002. Three pilot communities--Webster Springs and Elkins in West Virginia and Oakland, Maryland--have served as focal points for community contacts and projects. A primary goal for year three of the AFHA initiative included administering a mini-grants program to support community-based initiatives that advance the regional goals of the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area.

Short-term goals of AFHA include:

- Pursuing national designation of the heritage area,
- Developing a memorandum of understanding with the Monongahela National Forest, and
- Compiling a formal management plan for the heritage area.

During the first 2 years of the project, efforts to leverage additional funding were made to support

AFHA projects. These projects include developing a digital archive of historic photographs and stories from the region, facilitating workshops on heritage trail development and marketing, and providing service-learning opportunities for natural resource management students at West Virginia University.

Cooperative Extension has continued to expand its role in the governance and day-to-day management of AFHA. Extension specialists continue to serve as co-project investigators and project managers on the original USDA grant. Community-based Extension professionals serve on several key AFHA sub-committees and have made a number of project-related contributions such as serving on a mini-grants committee, facilitating AFHA stakeholder meetings, grant writing, and contributing to the drafting of a feasibility study for national designation of the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area.

Profile of Partners

The future success of the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area will depend on the regional support from a diverse set of stakeholder groups. From its inception, the AFHA has relied heavily on the human, technical, and financial resources of many individuals and organizations. The 90 participants in the AFHA initial organizing meeting represented a unique confluence of interests that foreshadowed the potential strength of the heritage area movement. Those interests included the economic development community, the tourism industry, Extension professionals, historic preservation organizations, resource management agencies, environmental and conservation organizations, the wood products industry, and educational institutions.

Examples of participating interest groups from each of these topical areas are presented in Table 1. While the participation of a number of interest groups can be explained by the forest heritage theme, the mutual goal of expanding heritage tourism opportunities in the region seems to unite a potentially influential coalition of economic development, tourism, Extension, and historic preservation groups across many heritage area initiatives.

Table 1.
Selected Interest Groups Participating in AFHA by Topical Area

Topical Area	Interest Group
Economic Development	West Virginia Development Office
	West Virginia Rural Development Council
	West Virginia Bureau of Commerce
	Webster County Development Authority
	Region VII Economic Development Authority
	Randolph County Chamber of Commerce
Tourism	West Virginia Division of Tourism
	Randolph County Convention and Visitors Bureau
	Maryland Office of Tourism Development
	Pocahontas County Convention and Visitors Bureau
	Pendleton County Visitors Committee

Historic Preservation	Preservation Alliance of West Virginia
	Potomac Heritage Partnership
	Rich Mountain Battlefield Association
	Aurora Area Heritage Society
	Elkins Historic Landmarks Commission
	Mountain State Railroad & Logging Historical Association
Resource Management	USDA Forest Service
	DOI National Park Service
	Maryland Department of Natural Resources
	West Virginia Division of Forestry
	DOI US Fish and Wildlife Service
	Woodland Owners Association of West Virginia
Environmental/Conservation	Canaan Valley Institute
	West Virginia Highlands Conservancy
	Shaver's Fork Coalition
	Conservation International
	West Virginia Land Trust
Wood Products Industry	West Virginia Forestry Association
	Georgia Pacific Corporation
	Allegheny Wood Products
Education	West Virginia University Forest Management Program
	WVU Recreation, Parks, and Tourism Resources Program
	WVU Extension Service

	WVU Bureau of Business Research
	WVU Office of Service Learning

The organizations listed in Table 1 underscore the importance of community- or place-based advocacy in the long-term success of the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area. Cooperative Extension has a unique opportunity and is well positioned to help convene such a diverse group of stakeholders around a regional heritage theme. Cooperative Extension is already woven into the fabric of rural communities nationwide and is a trusted source of information for people of all stripes. Time and time again, community-based Extension agents have served as a vital "community entry-point" for AFHA staff trying to build community participation around the state.

Partner Visions of Heritage Area

The 90 participants in the November 2001 general stakeholders' meeting were asked to reflect on what their vision for the heritage area was. Not surprisingly, these responses were varied and in large part reflected the organizational and personal values of participants. Nevertheless, common themes run through the visions expressed by participants, articulating some of the underlying dynamics and social tensions of the heritage area movement. A commonly expressed dialectic was the regionalism versus local control theme. Regionalism was often couched in the language of cooperation, partnerships, coordination, interdependence, or networking. Typical regional visions expressed were:

- "The Forest Heritage Area is about establishing an umbrella of communities for planning the development, interpretation, and promotion of forest-based attractions."
- "The Forest Heritage Area is a centrally administered transportation, experience, and information network of routes and trails."

On the other end of the spectrum, community leaders often emphasized the importance of local control and validation for the heritage area. For example:

- "The heritage area should be sustained by community consensus and support by school systems and civic organizations."
- "The heritage area should serve to document and conserve local histories and reflect local roots that are shared with the visitor."

Participant visions for the Forest Heritage Area also reinforced the realization that heritage areas represent a new kind of sustainable development, one that integrates historic preservation, tourism, and economic development. Historic preservation advocates emphasized the importance of preservation in restoring rural economies. "Communities are discovering how well the preservation of historic, cultural, and natural resources combines with tourism development to enable communities to diversify their economies and promote traditional ways of life."

Regional economic development authorities tended to focus on the commerce potential of the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area, which was typified by comments such as, "[the Forest Heritage Area will] create commerce through the development, preservation, interpretation, and promotion of forest-based attractions in the region."

State tourism officials and representatives of regional Convention and Visitors Bureaus portrayed the Forest Heritage Area as a heritage tourism initiative. "Heritage tourism is an important economic development strategy for rural communities in West Virginia. It offers an outstanding opportunity to encourage diversified economic development." Finally, somewhat unique to the forest and forestry heritage theme of the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area, forest industry representatives and forestry consultants see the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area as an opportunity to educate the public about responsible forestry practices and wood products.

Despite the considerable diversity of visions expressed at the November 2001 stakeholder meeting, participants were able to unite under the mission of the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area to work locally to conserve, develop, interpret, and promote a regional network of forest-based attractions and resources in the highlands of West Virginia and Maryland. Extension agents participated actively during this consensus-building process, serving as meeting facilitators in several of these public forums.

Perceived Benefits of Heritage Area

Participants of the November 2001 stakeholders' meeting identified a diverse set of benefits or outcomes that could result from the heritage area initiative. These benefits can be categorized into six benefit themes:

1. Community,

2. Economic,
3. Cultural,
4. Educational,
5. Environmental, and
6. Collaboration benefits (Table 2).

Table 2.
Perceived Benefits Resulting from Heritage Area

Benefit Categories	Benefit Items
Community	Build social capital
	Increase community pride
	Enhance sense of place
	Improve quality of life
	Stimulate other development initiatives
Economic	Create jobs
	Increase private investment
	Improve small business opportunities
	Diversify local economy
	Enhance leveraging of outside dollars
	Increase number of heritage tourists
Cultural	Celebrate and conserve local history
	Preserve cultural traditions
	Protect traditional ways of life
Educational	Increase visitor appreciation of forestry practices
	Develop local appreciation for regional history
	Increase understanding the role forests have played
	Inspire visitor sense of place

	Foster wonder and appreciation for forests
Environmental	Preserve forests
	Encourage stewardship of natural resources
	Contribute to sustainable forest management practices
	Protect special places
Collaboration	Build common ground and trust
	Provide opportunity to work together
	Build partnerships
	Encourage better communication and working relationship
	Promote regional planning/cooperative approach

These are similar to benefit categories identified by the Northern Forest Center (2000) in its analysis of the Northern Forest region that includes portions of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and New York. Both the Northern Forest and Appalachian region share a rich forest heritage.

Based upon participant responses, a sixth benefit category, collaboration, was added to coalesce the significant number of references to the importance of building partnerships, working together, and building common ground and trust across political, geographic, administrative, and stakeholder boundaries. This benefit category is more of a process indicator but has emerged as an important objective of the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area. These project outcomes provide powerful testimony for the community and economic benefits that can result from Extension leadership in regional heritage initiatives such as the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area.

Heritage Area Issues

The planning process to develop the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area has not been without its growing pains and challenges. Strong efforts have been made to be inclusive, encouraging active participation from the broadest set of stakeholder groups. This inevitably led to occasional differences of opinion among participating organizations and interest groups.

For example, at the initial project workshop in November 2001, a disagreement emerged over whether the heritage area should focus on *forest heritage* or *forestry heritage*. Participating wood products firm representatives and forestry advocates felt strongly that the project should focus more narrowly on the history and practice of forestry, while representatives of environmental and watershed groups advocated for a broader project focus of forest heritage--one that included forestry but also encompassed forest ecology, preservation, and forest-based artisans. Eventually, a consensus decision was made at the April 2002 general stakeholders meeting to move forward under the more inclusive forest heritage theme; however, the decision has dissatisfied some project stakeholders.

A second challenge for the heritage area has been accommodating property rights concerns of project stakeholders and county landowners. In West Virginia and western Maryland and, indeed, nationally, property rights issues have emerged as a major constraint to heritage area development and the passage of national enabling legislation for heritage areas. Corporate and private landowners want assurances that heritage area designation will not limit their land use options through increased regulations or federal government purchase of land. The National Park Service counters by asserting that the heritage area approach is based on locally driven partnerships that emphasize local control of land (Hoffman, 2003).

In West Virginia, approximately 83% of the land area is privately owned, 7% industry owned, and 10% is publicly owned land. Within the boundaries of the AFHA, the percentage of public land is higher due to the proximity of the Monongahela National Forest. So far, AFHA has accommodated

land use concerns by developing an asset mapping protocol where forest-based attractions can be listed only with the landowner's permission. If a landowner refuses to list a potential heritage area asset, for example, an old sawmill foundation, then the site is not listed in the regional asset map being compiled.

Again, these heritage area issues and concerns illuminate numerous possibilities for Extension professionals to play leadership roles in the planning and management of regional heritage area projects. Extension personnel provided technical support for the asset mapping protocol accommodating private landowner concerns as well as facilitation and conflict management skills that navigated the forest versus forestry heritage debates mentioned above.

Conclusions

Clearly, heritage areas are contributing sustainable economic benefits to rural regions throughout America in addition to enhancing community pride and well-being. Preliminary results from this case study underscore the diversity of interest groups that are coalescing into the heritage area movement. While this diversity is a potential strength, it can also be a weakness as heritage areas transcend the statutory duties of any single land-holding agency and rely heavily on coordinated management at the landscape level.

Results also illustrate how heritage areas are emerging as a new form of sustainable development, one that integrates historic preservation, tourism, the wood products industry, and economic development. Finally, the birthing process of the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area highlights the many challenges heritage area projects face nationwide, such as accommodating concerns of private property owners about not limiting their land use options.

Depending upon the type of heritage area, Extension agents and specialists can play a central role in the development and maintenance of the area by motivating participation from their local communities and clientele, and can consequently capitalize on the opportunities presented by them through these efforts. Extension's role as purveyors of technical information, teachers of public issues (Hahn 1990, Frederick 1998), and leaders in youth education can feed directly into advertising, education, and facilitating demands of growing heritage areas. So--whether your specialty is youth and 4-H, work force development, agriculture and natural resources, community and economic development, or tourism--your skills can be put to work within the heritage area movement.

The Appalachian Forest Heritage Area, initially conceived in the crucible of a university setting, is in a unique position to serve as a model or demonstration project for future heritage areas. Lessons learned, economic and social benefits derived, and implementation constraints will be continuously monitored and reported to the larger heritage, tourism, and Extension professions.

Heritage areas such as the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area are gaining momentum because people seek solace and meaning in their local and regional landscapes and special places when there is so much uncertainty in global economic and political affairs. Extension professionals have much to offer and much to gain by providing both regional and community-based leadership to the heritage area movement.

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