

Testimony for the Record
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National Parks Subcommittee

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Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding S. 1198, a bill to reauthorize the Essex National Heritage Area. Many of my comments also pertain to two other bills before you today S. 2131 to reauthorize the Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area, the Lackawanna Valley National Heritage Area and the Delaware and Lehigh National Heritage Corridor and S. 2133 to reauthorize the America's Agricultural Heritage Partnership in the State of Iowa. I have been asked to speak on their behalf and also to request that the record be held open so that these National Heritage Areas may be allowed to submit written testimony as well.

My name is Annie Harris, and I am the Executive Director of the Essex National Heritage Commission. The Commission is the regional non-profit organization that manages the Essex National Heritage Area, a 500 square mile region located north of Boston, rich in historic, cultural and natural resources. I also serve, in a volunteer capacity, as the Vice President of the Alliance of National Heritage Areas.

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, I would like to speak to you about the importance of reauthorizing the Essex National Heritage Area, and the other National Heritage Areas whose bills are before you today, in advance of our September 30, 2012 sunsets.

During these challenging economic times, every program that receives federal funding needs to justify its worth and deliver substantial benefits to the American public. The National Heritage Areas do this. Since our designation by Congress in 1996, the Essex National Heritage Area along with Rivers of Steel, Delaware & Lehigh Canal, Lackawanna Valley and America's Agricultural Heritage have proven that the National Heritage Area program is one of the most effective and efficient "external" programs in the National Park System.

In the Essex National Heritage Area, our work is to conserve, promote and develop the nationally significant stories and resources of the region. From the infamous Salem Witch Trials of 1692 to the “Perfect” storm of 1991, we have a robust network of public and private partnerships that rely on the heritage resources and stories to revitalize our communities and strengthen our economy. We promote cultural tourism sites and programs, supporting the third largest job producing industry in Massachusetts. We provide grants in conservation and resource stewardship that not only preserve the historic fabric of our region, but also create jobs in construction and tourism. Currently, it is estimated that we have created 1,488 jobs through our grants programs. For the past three summers, we have provided summer jobs for disadvantaged youth at two park sites. To date, 56 youth jobs have been created. We develop trails and bikeways for recreation and healthy living. Fourteen miles of trail were recently completed and are now providing safe recreation opportunities. We create regional events that build community pride and last year alone we assisted in attracting 1.3 million visitors to the region. We know that jobs and heritage development go hand in hand. Strong economies occur in places where there is deep community pride and dedicated stewardship.

I am here today to request the reauthorization of Essex Heritage and my fellow National Heritage Areas in Pennsylvania and Iowa. Although, I have visited my companion areas and have been very impressed with their work, I speak now only on the accomplishments of Essex Heritage and the work we have before us. I respectfully ask this committee to permit the other Areas to submit their own testimony with their accomplishments.

In the last fourteen and a half years, Essex Heritage has achieved a great deal but there is still much more to do. Let me cite some examples of our accomplishments and the work that lies ahead:

- Trail Development: Creating regional trails takes decades. In the case of the Essex Heritage Border-to-Boston Rail Trail and the adjacent Coastal Trail, the ideas for these trails began 45 years ago, but it took the unique management and partnership skills of Essex Heritage to secure the rights-of-way and see that the first miles of trail were built. With the growing need for safe roads to schools and youth obesity rising, these trail are much more than recreational routes. When the Coastal Trail and the Border to Boston Rail Trail are complete, there will be 58 miles of trails connecting half of the Area’s communities, providing safe pedestrian and bike access to town centers, libraries and schools as well as parks and natural recreation areas. This goal is within reach provided the coordination and guidance provided by the Heritage Area continues.

- Youth Job Corps: Our summer youth corps with the National Park Service has been highly successful but for every young person whom we have hired, there are 10 more still looking for work. We have made a point to hire the disadvantaged urban youth who live near our parks, providing them with jobs skills and career counseling along with their summer work. When a young person such as Daniel Mondragon says, “*This program has taught me responsibility, appreciation for the city and its history, and opened new doors for my future,*” how can any of us afford to let this program disappear?
- Stimulating the local economy: The Essex Coastal Scenic Byway is a strategy to highlight the historic, cultural and natural assets along the region’s coastline for the benefit of improving the local economies in the Area’s underserved urban communities as well as its affluent towns. Under the leadership of Essex Heritage, the recently completed plan sets a course for new ways in which the 13 coastal communities can collaborate for their mutual benefit. The promise is clear, but for success, Essex Heritage needs to continue.

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, as I testify for our reauthorization, you may be questioning why we deserve your attention when there are so many other needs especially within the National Park Service. Therefore, I would like to direct you to what the National Park Service, the National Park System Advisory Board and the National Parks Second Century Commission say about the National Heritage Areas and our importance to the National Park Service.

- In 2006, Douglas P. Wheeler, then Chairman of the National Park System Advisory Board, wrote: “National Heritage Areas represent a significant advance in conservation and historic preservation: large-scale, community-centered initiatives collaborating across political jurisdictions to protect nationally-important landscapes and living cultures.” (*Charting a Future for the National Heritage Areas; Foreword*).
- In 2009 the Second Century Commission Report - *Advancing the National Park Idea* - states that “National Heritage Areas provide a collaborative model that fits well within a large-landscape-scale preservation and conservation framework. Recognizing them as long-term assets to the national park system, we recommend that Congress pass authorizing legislation creating a system of National Heritage Areas providing for permanent funding and directing full program support from the National Park Service to designated areas.” (*Advancing the National Park Idea ; page 23*).

- In April 2010, President Obama launched America's Great Outdoors and in the report issued in February 2011 – *America's Great Outdoors: A Promise to Future Generations* – ten major priorities were identified from “providing quality jobs, career paths and service opportunities” to “making the federal government a more effective conservation partner.” In the goals and recommendations that follow on from these priorities, Essex Heritage has identified 30 areas of our work which directly support the AGO (*Essex Heritage and its Relevancy to America's Great Outdoors*, 2011). I am confident that my colleagues' work in their National Heritage Areas also supports and enhances the priorities of the AGO.
- In August 2011, the National Park Service *Call to Action: Preparing for a Second Century of Stewardship and Engagement*, states that the “parks” described in the report “connote not only the 394 units of the National Park System but national heritage areas ...as well.” (*Call to Action*; page 6)

Most recently, in January 2012, the National Park Service's Northeast Region published the *Report of Impacts and Operational Strategy for Sunsetting National Heritage Areas*. The report discusses the value that the National Heritage Areas provide to the National Park Service and lists five major impacts on the National Park Service if the Areas sunset (*Report of Impacts*; page 3)

1. NPS parks located within a heritage area will lose the opportunities and resources that enlarge understanding of the park resources and themes through the NHA.
2. NPS identity is key to attracting and keeping other partners engaged in NHAs. The NPS will lose the leverage that its contributions to NHAs, proportionately modest but essential to operational support, create.
3. NHAs act as conveners for many other partners within the region. The NPS parks and programs would have difficulty replacing this partnership facilitation.
4. NHAs will have to curtail programs and events that highlight the distinctive cultural and natural assets of the region for lack of funding once NPS leverage ends.
5. NHAs bring numerous organizations and volunteers to the NPS mission within the communities they serve. The NPS will lose these connections.

The NPS NER report further states that the “National Heritage Areas have an impressive body of accomplishment in conservation, cultural and educational preservation and programming, economic development, recreation, and heritage tourism. They have provided the NPS regions the means by which to organize diverse communities around shared history and culture.” It then refers to Director Jon Jarvis conversation with the directors of the National Heritage Areas in February 2011, when he described the National Heritage Areas as “an alternate model, more versatile and inclusive, a new iteration of the classic model of parks.” (*Report of Impacts: page 2*)

National Heritage Areas have proven to be one of the most effective ways for the National Park Service to engage and partner with local citizens of every background in the preservation and interpretation of their nationally important and significant resources - and this work happens without the National Park Service having to bear all the costs of owning, maintaining and managing these places. National Heritage Areas involve people where they live in long-term, multi-partnership, large landscape and community conservation projects without requiring that the residents and businesses vacate the area because National Heritage Areas do not require public ownership for their success. The value of the National Heritage Areas lies in their ability:

- To amplify their limited annual federal funds with matching dollars many times over;
- To leverage the public investment with private funding, volunteer time, in-kind donations, and local and state contributions;
- To promote the principles of conservation and preservation from the grassroots and in harmony with the goals of the National Park Service;
- To create jobs and revitalize communities using the Area’s indigenous resources;
- To assist the National Park Service in meeting its mission by proving a bridge to local communities, underserved populations, youth and diversity.

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today, and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.