



APPALACHIAN FOREST NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA

2023 Annual Report





Greetings

Dear AFNHA Stakeholders, Partners and Friends,

Our 2023 Annual Report follows. On behalf of the Board of Directors, we are delighted to share our reflection of growth and progress.

This year was a milestone for Appalachian Forest National Heritage Area [AFNHA]. Our Management Plan—following over three years of development—was affirmed by the National Park Service (NPS). Our detailed operating-plan approval then permitted funding for enhanced operations of our organization.

For the first time in our history, now more than 20 years, we were empowered to help fund more than Two hundred thousand dollars (\$200,000.00) in grants for worthwhile projects of our partners. The economic and program development benefits cannot be overstated.

Our AmeriCorps program placed capable personnel in positions with our partners throughout the region. Many of the placements included multiyear dedication to communities, producing impactful assistance to those engaged in bolstering historic preservation, site interpretation, resource conservation and positive visitor experience.

Our longstanding tourism development initiative, the Highlands Creative Economy (HCE) working group held monthly virtual meetings, which were highlighted by the Annual Tourism Summit held at the Evergreen Heritage Center in Allegheny County, Maryland during August. The HCE is funded in part by a generous grant of the C. W. Benedum Foundation.

We are not slowing down. New staff members bring our organization key skills to help us advance our mission. Our charge is to provide unmatched opportunities for visitors and residents in our 18-county region in West Virginia and western Maryland.

We invite You to join us in our work. Become a Member today.

Sincerely,

Bob Johnson

Robert C. 'Bob' Johnson, President
Appalachian Forest National Heritage Area





Passing the Torch

Since our designation as a National Heritage Area in 2019, our organization has grown from a small staff of three to a strong team of seven. In 2023 we welcomed Christy Wham as Administrative Manager and Josh Wanstreet as Conservations Programs Manager. Our Management Plan was approved in August, providing direction for the future. This year we saw another big change. Our longtime leader, Phyllis Baxter stepped down, and Logan Smith has stepped up to become our new Executive Director.

Phyllis has been involved with the Appalachian National Heritage Area (AFNHA) since the beginning. For over 20 years, she has helped achieve all our important milestones. She has provided excellent vision and leadership at every step. She was there for the initial stakeholder meetings that helped establish the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area (AFHA) as a non-profit organization. Phyllis was instrumental in starting our long-running AmeriCorps program and advocating for the congressional legislation that established our National Heritage Area, creating AFNHA.

Logan has been involved since 2008 and, as Deputy Director, has supported much of the day-to-day operations of our organization. Now he will take on a larger role of leadership in managing and planning our programs.

To assist with the long-term development of our organization we have also brought on Larry Jent as Fiscal Sustainability Director. Larry brings deep connections to Appalachian culture and a wealth of experience in nonprofit management.

Thank you Phyllis for your years of service and congratulations!



Passing the Torch



Logan Smith, Phyllis Baxter, and Larry Jent



Current and former Board members presented Phyllis with a handmade stained glass piece



Appalachian Forest Grants

In our first act as a fully approved National Heritage Area we awarded over **\$200,000** in grants to area organizations through our new Appalachian Forest Grants program. These 19 projects will support preservation, interpretation, tourism development, and partnership development in several communities. These projects will include exhibits and signage related to local history and ecology, repairs to historic buildings, original theatrical productions celebrating regional culture, arts and heritage educational programs, and more. As we administer these grants over the next two years, grantees expect to leverage an additional **\$429,906**.

We plan to offer this grant program each year. See our website for [application guidelines](#) and the [list of projects awarded in 2023](#).



A MEMBER OF THE

**National Heritage
Area System**



Appalachian Forest Discovery Center

We opened the Appalachian Forest Discovery Center in 2014 in the historic Darden Mill in Elkins, West Virginia. Serving as our museum and visitor information center, the original exhibit in half of the first floor explores Nature, History, Forestry, and Culture topics from our initial interpretive plan. Each year, a standalone temporary exhibit in the second half of the first floor has explored one of those topics in greater detail. Since opening, **14,182 people** have visited the Discovery Center.

In our 2023 season we welcomed **2,195 total visitors** from **27 states** (plus D.C.). This year's 2023 exhibit "**Material Culture: Wood and Weaving**" explored the influence of our mountainous forest environment on folk art and music. We also hosted a "Movies at the Museum" series of documentaries on regional music and culture.



We are beginning to revise and replace the long-term exhibit with a new, fresh interpretation and exhibits that are more interactive and accessible. The new Appalachian Forest Discovery Center primary exhibit will introduce and reflect upon newly revised Management Plan themes based on Forest Abundance, Crucible of Isolation, Logging Boom Builds the Nation, and the Resilient Forest.





AmeriCorps

In the 2022-2023 AmeriCorps program year we supported **26 members** at **18** conservation, heritage, and community development organizations to benefit local communities, assets, and landscapes.

These members delivered educational programs to an audience of **7,714 individuals**, monitored **9,425 acres** and improved **956 acres** of public land, managed **2,867 hours** of volunteer service, and welcomed **39,756 visitors** across our region.





2022-23 AmeriCorps Sites





Highlands Creative Economy

Over the past two years this program has supported over **230 individuals** from tourism organizations, businesses, and attractions in all 18 AFNHA counties and elsewhere in West Virginia and Maryland. In March we partnered with Eastern West Virginia Community and Technical College to hold the first ever Potomac Highlands Agritourism Summit which promoted resources for businesses and producers, and celebrated the release of the [Potomac Highlands Agricultural Tourism Guide](#). In August, our 2023 Tourism Summit brought over **70 people** from multiple states and counties together to western Maryland to discuss recreation and heritage tourism. Additional training events in the fall covering volunteer management and interpretation engaged another **50 individuals** representing **22 organizations**.

In October we received an additional grant from the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation to support the Highlands Creative Economy program. Over the next two years we will expand our program's ongoing training and networking opportunities with new events and workshops, including new familiarization tours and additional tourism summits.





Conservation Programs

Pollinator Initiative

This year we distributed hundreds of packets of native wildflower seeds at public events throughout our region, and **185 individuals** and organizations signed our pollinator pledge to support pollinators and their habitats on public and private lands by: Increasing and Improving Pollinator Habitat, Facilitating Partnerships, Promoting Conservation, Expanding Pollinator Education, and Producing Research.



National Visitor Use Monitoring Survey

In partnership with the Monongahela National Forest, we began the 2023/2024 National Visitor Use Monitoring (NVUM) Survey. This year-long project will conduct surveys of visitors at recreational sites across the Monongahela National Forest to assess visitor satisfaction across multiple criteria. The program will conduct nearly 300 surveys at 92 public access sites on the Mon through September of 2024. So far our staff conducted **60 total surveys** at **37 recreation sites**.



Interpretation Programs

America250 in the Appalachian Forest

This summer we launched our new program to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the founding of America by sharing the stories of all the people, communities, and places that have shaped our region. AFNHA will be featuring America250 stories through the summer of 2026. Partners are encouraged to participate through submission of stories or developing their own projects. In 2023 we featured 7 web articles featuring a diverse array of individuals and communities.



Read the latest stories [on our website!](#)

Indigenous Voices in Appalachia

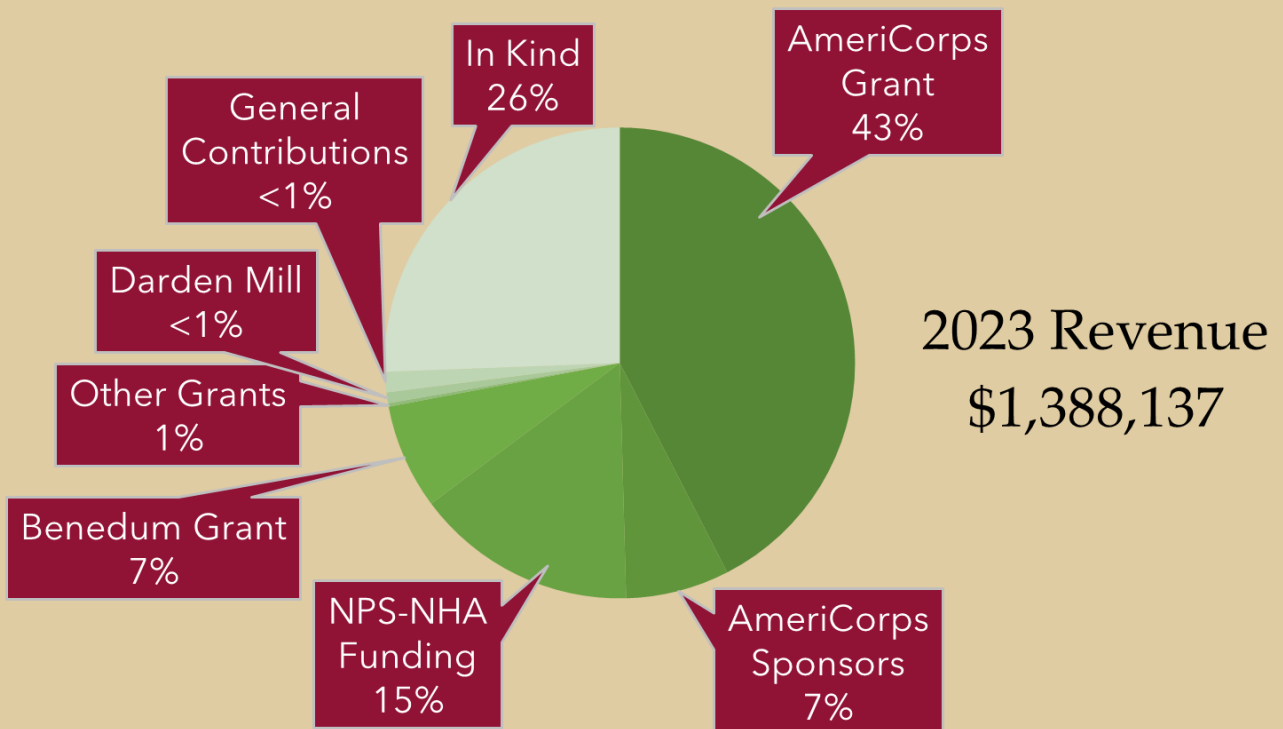
In 2023 we received an Inclusive Storytelling grant from the National Park Service Foundation to explore indigenous history in the AFNHA region, and planning is well underway. Our 2024 exhibit at the Appalachian Forest Discovery Center will share the history and language of the Indigenous cultures with connections to our region. We will also host public events featuring indigenous presenters, artists, and performers in summer and fall.



Financials

Revenue

AmeriCorps Grant	\$589,209
AmeriCorps Sponsors	\$98,883
NPS-NHA Funding	\$211,450
Benedum Foundation Grant	\$100,240
Other Grants	\$3,253
Darden Mill Rent and Giftshop	\$10,268
General Contributions	\$19,470
In Kind	\$355,364
Total	\$1,388,137

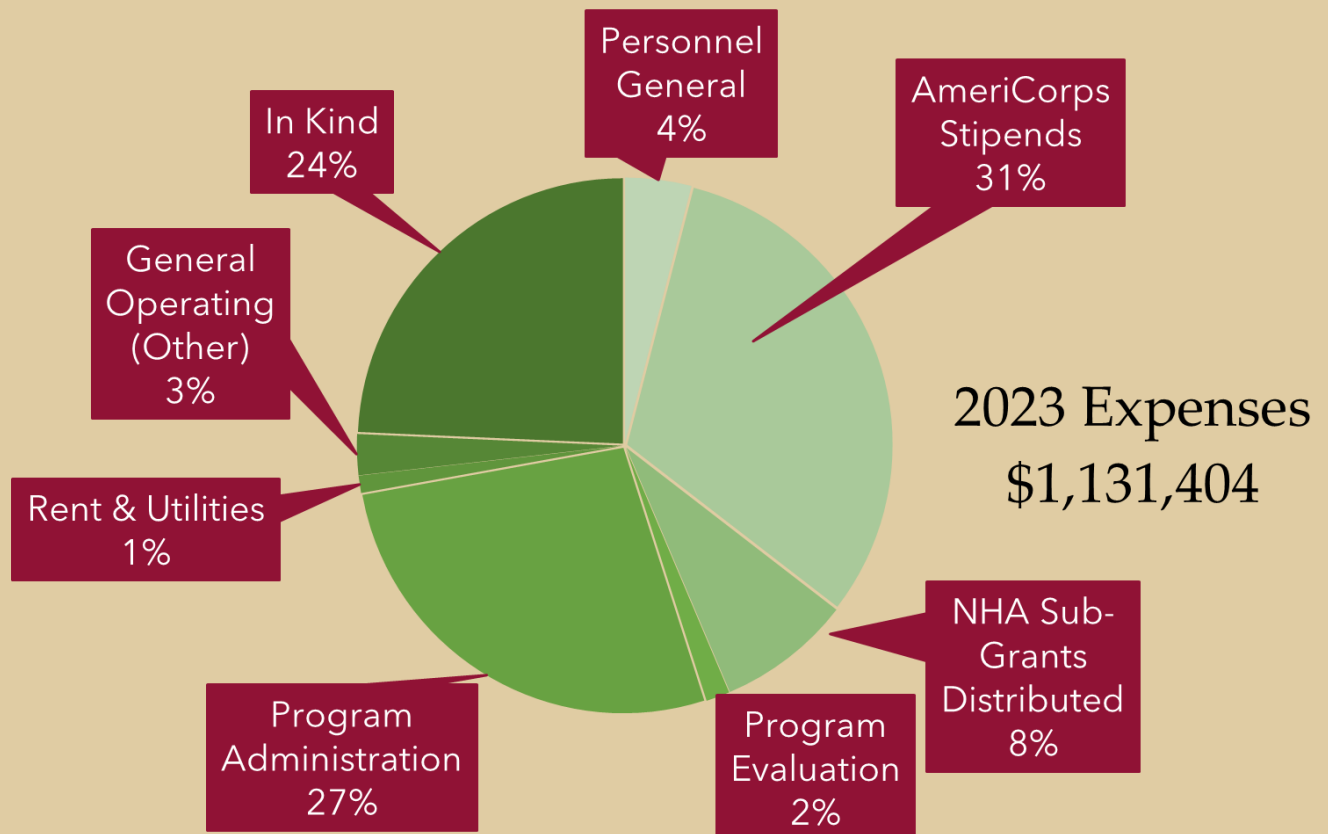




Financials

Expenses

Personnel General	\$58,974
AmeriCorps Stipends	\$459,516
NHA Sub-Grants Distributed	\$119,426
Program Evaluation	\$21,125
Program Administration	\$396,238
Rent & Utilities	\$15,410
General Operating (Other)	\$36,375
In Kind	\$355,364
Total	\$1,462,428





APPALACHIAN FOREST NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA

Mission

The Appalachian Forest National Heritage Area conserves, interprets, and promotes forest heritage to enhance landscapes and communities in the highlands of West Virginia and Maryland.

Contact Info

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