

Executive Summary
Appalachian Forest Heritage Area
Concept Plan and Strategic Direction
Feasibility Study for National Heritage Area

The Appalachian Forest Heritage Area (AFHA) is a grassroots effort to promote economic and community development by linking central Appalachian forest history, culture, natural history, products and forest management into a multi-state heritage tourism initiative. The purpose is to create a sustainable heritage area based on the unified theme of “*FOREST HERITAGE*”. AFHA is creating a network of visitor destinations and local heritage experiences that link existing and prospective forest-based historic sites, artisans and craftspeople, manufacturers, and working forests. These sites, communities, products, programs, experiences, events and services will provide high quality attractions for visitors, and economic and quality of life benefits for local residents.

Need for the AFHA

The Appalachian Forest Heritage Area (AFHA) provides a regional solution to the needs for both community economic development and for appreciation of cultural heritage of the central Appalachian forest region of western Maryland and West Virginia.

Appalachian communities have been caught in epic struggles between development and environmental forces. Communities are struggling to find their own directions. Nationally, a growing movement has emerged to utilize natural and cultural assets to promote economic development.

Tourism is the third largest retail industry in America. Heritage tourism, based on travel to experience authentic history and special places, is a significant and growing part of this market. Heritage tourism represents a promising strategy for economic diversification rooted in local traditions. Communities have valuable natural and cultural resources, but often lack the expertise to develop these resources as tourism destinations. Working in isolation, communities cannot leverage adequate funding for infrastructure development, nor can they create the cohesive experience that will attract tourists to remote areas.

The AFHA has a rich, complex history of timber harvesting, forest management and the production of forest products, but these stories have not been presented comprehensively. Major strides in forest health, productivity, management, and wood utilization have contributed to a vibrant natural resource-based economy and culture. The Appalachian traditions of folkways adapted to the forested mountains are prevalent. Yet many visitors have previously had little understanding of the links among forestry practices, rural traditions, conservation, and sustainable economies.

To the degree that rural communities and local industries take pride in their forest traditions and stewardship, the long-term sustainability of West Virginia and western Maryland’s forest-dependent communities is more secure. Forest-related heritage tourism can fulfill the need for public education, thus contributing to an understanding of “good forestry.” Forest-related heritage tourism also fosters economic development consistent with local traditions and assets. Urban visitors already visit West Virginia and western Maryland for outdoor recreation and heritage tourism opportunities. This project capitalizes on that trend to increase public education and local economic development.

Background of AFHA

An initiative of West Virginia University's Davis College of Agriculture, Forestry and Consumer Sciences and the WVU Extension Service, the AFHA was originally funded by a USDA "Fund for Rural America" grant. It has been coordinated by a project team from West Virginia University (WVU) and Canaan Valley Institute (CVI), with active partnership from state and federal agencies, non-profit organizations, and communities throughout the area.

Since its October 2001 inception, the AFHA project has convened large-group stakeholder meetings and numerous task group sessions. A broad range of participants with diverse backgrounds and viewpoints are participating to guide the project's course. The work of building a consistent theme and integrated network goes hand-in-hand with communities committing to local projects. This grassroots approach helps ensure local community successes and balanced direction.

The initial AFHA grant will expire in the fall of 2005. In order to carry on these efforts beyond the initial grant, a non-profit organization called Appalachian Forest Heritage Area, Inc. has been created to assume responsibility for the future of the AFHA. The non-profit Governing Council representing communities, interest groups, and involved stakeholders and partners vision and plan the project. Task groups have been active on a number of fronts: identifying assets, interpretation, business development, communications, marketing, and organization. Three pilot communities –Webster County, WV, Randolph County, WV and Garrett County, MD -- are implementing projects in model communities.

This executive summary describes the AFHA project status and future directions as the project transitions from the initial grant-funded project to an independent non-profit organization. It includes elements of the Strategic Plan guiding the organization progress, and the recommendations of the Feasibility Study that recommended National Heritage Area designation for the AFHA.

Strategic Plan – Vision to Goals

Definition

Forest Heritage is the ongoing story of how the forest shapes history and culture, and how natural forces and human use shape the forest.

Vision

For centuries, the forests of the Appalachian Mountains have sustained local settlers, provided raw materials for America's economic expansion, and inspired visitors with their grandeur and beauty. The Appalachian Forest Heritage Area (AFHA) is dedicated to the story of this forest legacy and the mountain people who forged it.

The AFHA attracts visitors to discover the rich forest heritage of the highlands of West Virginia and western Maryland. Visitors explore thematic trails leading them to recreation, learning, entertainment, and appreciation experiences targeted to their own interests.

Communities benefit from the AFHA in several ways. Economic markets increase for local events and attractions, tourist services, forest industry products and the arts. Communities grow stronger through local participation and regional networking. The entire region cooperates toward a shared approach to use, conserve, and appreciate our multi-faceted forest.

Mission

The Appalachian Forest Heritage Area (AFHA) works locally to conserve, develop, interpret, and promote a regional network of forest-based resources and experiences 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.

Goals

1. Develop a regional Heritage Area based on forest heritage that can serve as a model of successful Heritage Area development based on grassroots partnerships, including seeking National Heritage Area designation.
2. Develop and promote a cohesive regional network of forest heritage tourism destinations.
3. Strengthen small businesses, communities, and grassroots organizations; foster local economic development; and build regional partnerships.
4. Interpret a broad range of forest themes, including forestry, natural resources, history, and culture.

Assets and Significance

The Appalachian Forest Heritage Area encompasses a key section of the central Appalachian highlands. Its temperate hardwood forest hosts a unique biodiversity of plant and animal species. These vast forests helped build and fuel the industrial revolution in the rest of the country. The AFHA has a rich and complex history of timber harvesting, forest management and the production of forest products. Major strides in forest health, productivity, management, and wood utilization have contributed to a vibrant natural resource-based economy and culture.

The Appalachian Forest Heritage Area has outstanding natural resources, historical themes, and cultural assets of state and national significance. This forest provided resources for American industrial expansion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The industrialists who led the resource boom used this region as their power base on the national stage. Lessons learned from cutting these forests contributed significantly to the conservation movement, the formation of eastern National Forests, and rise of modern scientific forestry. The central hardwood forest is the largest of its kind in the world, with the AFHA region as a key section. It has regrown from the original wholesale cutting aided by scientific forest management and the protection of public lands.

Natural, cultural, historic and recreational resources combine to form a cohesive, nationally distinctive landscape in central Appalachia, arising from patterns of human activity as shaped by the forested mountains. Such patterns make the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area representative of the national experience of adapting to the environment, through the natural forest and historic features that remain and the Appalachian cultural traditions that have evolved in the area. People continue to shape the landscape in their use of the forests, including the wood products industries that utilize the forest today.

Protected and designated natural resources within the Heritage Area include The Monongahela National Forest, portions of the George Washington National Forest, Canaan Valley National Wildlife Refuge, the nation's first National Recreation Area at Seneca Rocks/Spruce Knob, fourteen National Natural Landmarks, five wilderness areas, 12 West Virginia State Parks, 5 West Virginia State Forests, 9 Maryland State Parks, and 4 Maryland State Forests, plus a number of natural areas protected by non-profit organizations.

Significant historic and cultural sites and resources within the Heritage Area include five National Historic Landmarks, portions of the C&O Canal National Historical Park, the Historic National Road All American Road, Canal Place Heritage Area, two national scenic byways, 13 state designated byways, and a total of over 26 historic districts and 215 individual sites listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Forest Heritage story can be told in the Heritage Area through a variety of existing resources, such as remnants of old growth forests, protected wilderness areas, historic sites from the logging era (including the intact logging company town at Cass Scenic Railroad State Park,)

national and state forest lands created to foster regrowth of the forest, CCC structures demonstrating conservation efforts, experimental forests demonstrating the evolution of forest management, managed public and private forests, and a dynamic forest industry with mills and value-added products demonstrating the ongoing importance of the forest and forest products to this region.

The extensive Appalachian hardwood forests and undeveloped rural character of the Appalachian Forest Heritage Area provide natural and recreational resources, scenic vistas, outdoor recreation and opportunities for nature observation for people throughout the United States to enjoy.

The central Appalachian culture including folk life, music, dance, crafts, and traditions are inextricably tied to the forest and reliance upon forest products. The icons of culture are still celebrated and serve to preserve regional heritage that is central to the charm that brings many visitors. Ethnic identities have intermingled to form an evolved regional culture, but with many indicators of original origins. The Heritage Area represents a cross section of American history illustrating how people lived in and interacted with the forested mountains, including Native Americans, frontier settlements, the Civil War First Campaign and formation of a state, blending of cultures from periods of European and African-American immigration, and adaptation to changing economies in contemporary America. The forested landscapes of the present directly link the Forest Heritage of the past to the future, as do the historic valley settlements, farmlands, and industrial landscapes.

The Appalachian Forest Heritage Area is suitable for inclusion as a National Heritage Area for its representation of forest heritage, especially of the central hardwood forest. The wealth of resources to be included, conserved, and enhanced by this designation is well documented. While forests are included in other national lands and designations, no other National Heritage Area has identified forest heritage as its primary theme. The AFHA is also in a unique position to articulate the theme of central Appalachian culture.

The feasibility of the Appalachian Forest National Heritage Area is shown by the strong support demonstrated in the study. State and federal partners, local governments and organizations, and a wide variety of non-profit groups, businesses, and residents have expressed support for this designation, as shown by active stakeholder participation in the AFHA efforts and the Feasibility Study, as well as by more than 150 support letters. The Stakeholders participating have agreed on Core Values emphasizing voluntary partnerships from a broad range of interest groups, balanced interpretation, forest sustainability for industry, communities, and ecosystems, working forests and cultural heritage tourism as components of economic development, and that AFHA is not a land management organization. The enthusiasm and participation level in the existing AFHA project indicate the potential success of the proposed Appalachian Forest National Heritage Area.

Recommendations and Next Steps

This Feasibility Study recommends designation of the Appalachian Forest National Heritage Area. Designation as a National Heritage Area will assist the efforts of the States of West Virginia and Maryland, the AFHA non-profit organization, and participating organizations, communities and private businesses to realize the full potential of the cultural, natural, historic and recreational resources of the region

This Study also recommends continued efforts by the AFHA organization to move forward with implementation of the Strategic Plan, keep expanding community participation, and seek funding for continued operations and strategic investments. As the implementation progresses, attention to the Core Values of the organization will be used to address stakeholder concerns and maintain balanced involvement from the full range of diverse interests working with the AFHA.

Contact Information

The complete AFHA Feasibility Study and the full current Strategic Plan can be seen on the AFHA web site at www.appalachianforest.us. Comments on these documents are encouraged. To get more information, offer your comment, get on the AFHA mailing list, or get involved as an AFHA stakeholder, please contact us at:

Appalachian Forest Heritage Area, Inc.
PO Box 1206
Elkins WV 26241
Phyllis Baxter, Executive Director
(304) 636-6182
(304) 636-2467 (h)
phyllisb@meer.net