

# The Cumberland Plateau Heritage Corridor Feasibility Study:

## *Lessons Learned in Developing Sustainable Tourism*

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The Cumberland Plateau Heritage Corridor represents an instructive case study in ambitious planning for sustainable heritage tourism. It is one of the biggest and most active heritage tourism initiatives in Tennessee, and possibly in the whole southeast. Under this initiative, 21 counties have agreed to work together on a regional basis with a common understanding that sustainable tourist development is the key to their future economic development. Susan Whitaker, Commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Tourist Development, has cited the Alliance for the Cumberlands, the coordinating entity for the project, as one of the state's leading organizations in regional planning for heritage tourism.

The project area is a region of nearly 9,000 square miles which has never projected a widely recognized identity. Tourism marketing in the region has been traditionally fragmented among the 21 counties, each competing to attract visitors to its own sites. Yet, with a total of 510,000 acres of State and Federal public lands and an exceptional array of geological, biological, scenic, historic, and cultural resources, the region as a whole offers visitor opportunities that could easily rival the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The challenge, then, was to put the region in a position to market itself as a distinctive, appealing visitor destination in its own right.

As our point of departure, we chose to document that the region could qualify as a National Heritage Area. This is a good framework for any sustainable tourism planning process, regardless of whether the region receives that designation or not, because the National Park Service's criteria for National Heritage Areas embody all the critical elements of effective development of a sustainable tourism initiative.

The lessons learned in planning the Cumberland Plateau Heritage Corridor could be instructive for other sustainable tourism projects. Here we present the three that we consider the most important:

### **Lesson 1. Build an Encyclopedic Inventory**

Heritage tourists, especially families travelling together, can have very diverse interests. To make the most of all the corridor has to offer, our inventory process cast the widest possible net, searching for any and all assets that might enrich the visitor experience. Here is a summary of the various kinds of information we collected:

- **Historic resources:** National Historic Landmarks, National Battlefields, National Register sites and Historic Districts, State Historic Areas, State and Federal Archaeological Sites, Native American sites and organizations, very old churches, and local and regional history museums.
- **Natural and recreational resources:** National Natural Landmarks; Federal and State public lands, including parks, natural areas, wildlife management areas, forests, trails and greenways, rivers, and lakes; geological features such as waterfalls, caves, natural arches, rock climbing areas, and high quality streams; wildlife viewing opportunities and zones of exceptional biodiversity.
- **Transportation resources:** State Scenic Highways and Parkways, exceptionally scenic State highways and county byways, State Bicycle Routes, pioneer era trails, and abandoned rail lines.
- **Agricultural resources:** "Pick Tennessee Products" sites, county and local agricultural fairs, and Century Farms (those worked by the same family for 100 years or more.)
- **Cultural resources:** folkways interpretive programs, old-time music venues, folklife festivals, storytelling festivals, food festivals, arts fairs, and traditional artisans; stories that express the history and culture of the place.
- **Visitor resources:** bed and breakfast establishments, hotels and motels, Main Street districts, and visitor centers.

To compile such a wide range of information spread over such a large region would have been extremely time consuming until the advent of the Internet. Though this information was scattered in bits and pieces among dozens of sources, much of it could be readily retrieved with online digging. In addition, numerous state and federal agencies readily obliged our requests for more in-dept information than was available on the web, often in a digital format that could be entered into a GIS database. We continually refined our knowledge by consulting with long-time residents and publications. The result was by far the most comprehensive picture of the Plateau ever assembled.

## **Lesson 2: Dig Deep to Find an Authentic Identity**

We were determined to avoid simply pasting a cute label on the region, something we've witnessed far too often. Instead, we went through a complex process of boiling down all the information from our inventory in search of a common thread running through the region's history and culture. Long-time Cumberland Plateau residents and scholars in history and Appalachian Studies were asked to express what they would consider to be distinctive characteristics of the region's identity. In their responses, a group of related words were repeated frequently: "refuge," "preserve," "sanctuary," and "island." These words suggested that, in interpreting the complex heritage of the Cumberland Plateau, the unifying theme should articulate the region's identity as a place where natural and cultural elements which have disappeared elsewhere have been miraculously preserved. This simple premise pointed the way toward a deeper exploration of the region's frontier roots. We finally arrived at the phrase "The Hidden Frontier" to express the Plateau's identity as a sanctuary not only for unspoiled nature but also for many elements of pioneer folkways and culture.

The point of this branding exercise was more than to find a marketing hook. It is important for the residents of a region that lacks a distinctive sense of its own identity to begin to see themselves as stewards of a unique and historically significant place, one they can be proud to call home. When we presented our proposal at public meetings, residents consistently embraced the theme of the frontier as an authentic expression of their family and community heritage. Many said they considered themselves conveyors of the 250-year-old traditions and culture of the frontier. We also discovered that many of the most pristine areas of the corridor are now protected only because the residents worked persistently to keep intact portions of the original forest resources which sustained their ancestors and which they still regarded as necessary for the continued viability of their culture. Having an identity for this initiative that expresses the authentic self-image of the residents means that local stakeholders will have much more of a stake in the outcome.

## **Lesson 3: Work Work Work to Build Stakeholder Relationships**

Forming strong relationships is like making good whiskey: it absolutely cannot be rushed. Yet this is the key to a sustainable tourism initiative, because the project's long-term success always depends on the depth and breadth of the support it receives. As with the inventory, our planning process cast the widest possible net in searching for stakeholders and potential partners. The first step was to get the blessing of the Tennessee Farm Bureau, because farmers are influential on the Plateau as in all rural areas. We then held a total of 15 public meetings throughout the corridor and had dozens of individual meetings with local leaders. The Alliance for the Cumberlands actively sought diverse representation in its membership, which grew to 41 agencies and organizations. Our research uncovered a total of 30 non-profit organizations and 33 county historical associations that are involved in some aspect of the heritage corridor. Many of these are already partners; others will be important allies as we move forward.

We have also benefitted from building strong relationships with government agencies. We met numerous times with the leadership of the 21 county governments of the corridor. We identified some 20 Federal and State government programs with activities in the region that shared goals with the heritage corridor. We approached all the related government agencies and worked to help them appreciate and understand their various roles in helping this kind of initiative succeed. This was hard work, but it's paying off: the departments of Tourist Development, Agriculture, Economic Development, Environment and Conservation, Transportation, and Wildlife are all active partners with the Plateau project. Building on the success of this initiative, these agencies have more recently agreed to work cooperatively in support of a formal State Heritage Corridors program, which is now being developed.