Louisiana Rural Tourism Conference

“Developing Tourism Opportunities and (by) Preserving Community Identity”

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Atchafalaya Trace Commission
The Atchafalaya Trace Heritage Area
Heritage Areas
What is a Heritage Area?

- Recognition of a *living landscape*.
- Places where people continue to live, work, and play.
- Places where the common stories of the region can tie people of all cultures together.
- *Not a National Park (non-regulatory)*
What is a Heritage Area?

- **A Place**
  - Concentrations of important resources
  - Known for unique culture and identity
  - Good places to live and visit
  - Regional
What is a Heritage Area?

- A concept that combines:
  - Resource conservation
  - Economic development & tourism
  - Outdoor recreation
  - Interpretation & education
  - Collaborative implementation among multiple interests
Heritage Areas Around the United States

- 23 Nationally Designated Heritage Areas
- 5 Established Statewide Programs
Lackawanna River Valley NHA
Scranton, Pennsylvania
Blackstone River Valley NHA
Massachusetts & Rhode Island

Blackstone River Valley
National Heritage Corridor
Lancaster Heritage Program
Lancaster County, Pennsylvania
What do they all have in common?

• Use their shared stories to facilitate positive change (tourism, resource preservation, economic development, etc.)
The Atchafalaya Trace Heritage Area
The Atchafalaya Trace
Heritage Area

- The Atchafalaya Trace is composed of thirteen parishes in and around the Atchafalaya Basin: Avoyelles, Assumption, Concordia, East Baton Rouge, Iberia, Iberville, Lafayette, St. Landry, St. Martin, St. Mary, West Baton Rouge, Terrebonne
Nationally Significant Resources

- **NATURAL**
  - Largest river swamp in the country
  - Levee system
  - 30% of the Mississippi’s flow
  - Ecosystem changing with siltation
  - Recreation/Crawfishing
  - Cypress Timber/Oil & Gas

- **CULTURAL**
  - Diversity
  - Food, Music, Art, Crafts
Program History

• Created by the Legislature in 1997
• Placed within the Department of Culture, Recreation & Tourism
• Start-up funding in 1998
• First Commission meeting in 1999
Why a Heritage Area for the Atchafalaya?

• To preserve, interpret and share what makes the entire Atchafalaya region unique
• To enhance economic development
• To increase sustainable heritage tourism
• Louisiana’s Grand Canyon?

• Reflected in the enabling legislation
Making the Legislation a Reality

- First step was to devise a Management Action Plan that detailed projects and initiatives
- Implement the Management Plan
- Achieve National Heritage Area Designation
  - Benefits
Challenges

- Rapidly changing ecosystem
- Projected flat economic growth
- Aging population
- Sprawl and inconsistent development
- Low regional awareness
Goals

- Build Understanding and Identity
- Strengthen Place
- Expand Economic Opportunity
- Strengthen Community Capacity
Implementation Approach

• An integrated approach--beginning with interpretation and education activities that will lead to the conservation of natural, cultural, historical, and recreational resources

• Working in partnership with others across the region to boost local efforts while avoiding duplication.

• Always keep sustainable economic development in mind
RESULT: The Management Plan

- Just completed!
- Worked with Mary Means & Associates
- Took a little over a year to finish
- Published in the next few months
Next Steps for the ATHA

• IMPLEMENTATION METHODS
  – Initiate a non-profit Atchafalaya Heritage Trust
  – Convene State Working Group
  – Initiate the Heritage Enterprise Zone
  – Pursue national designation
Next Steps for the ATHA

• ACTION PLAN AND PROJECTS
  – Regional Projects for the first 3 years
  – Maps, guidebooks, web site
  – Core driving routes
  – Implement Interpretive Plan
What do all heritage areas have in common?

- Use their shared stories to facilitate positive change (tourism, resource preservation, economic development, etc.)
How does this apply to me and this session’s topic?

• The same principles of community authenticity, reconnected heritage, and shared stories can be applied and used anywhere...even an individual town

• Your community is held together and defined by its shared stories

• Lessons learned in applying these principles in the Atchafalaya Trace project
Questions to ask to get started:

- “What makes my community unique?”
- “Why was my community established?”
Using your stories like the heritage area...

- The stories and unique qualities of your community should be at the heart of not only your tourism strategy, but also:
  - Community re-development efforts
  - “Design Guideline Notebook”
  - Sustainable growth strategies
  - Conservation priorities
Using your stories...

- Principle of using stories as your most important resource (your starting point) can be applied in two ways...
Planning for new tourism opportunities:

• First:
  – is to let the stories drive your tourism master plan (management plan)
  – Let the stories decide which sites and resources you invest in
  – "Interpretive plan"
  – Let the stories drive your marketing and promotion
Why?

• Because of the growing market of *heritage tourism*:
  – *Travel that allows visitors to experience places and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past*
• Authenticity is the key
  – “A slice or the real America…”
• Sophisticated traveler
• Time to reinvent yourself as something more authentic?
Where is this being done in the Atchafalaya Trace?

- St. Martinville
- Morgan City
- Opelousas/Eunice
- Plaquemine
- Simmesport
Planning for new tourism opportunities:

- Second: (What we learned from the heritage area planning process):
  - “Back up a step” and lay foundation
  - Reconnect people with their surroundings
  - Build community pride and ownership
  - Focus on positive aspects
  - Use stories to get the community to actually be involved in the planning process
Planning for new tourism opportunities:

- ADDED BENEFIT TO SECOND USE OF STORIES IN PLANNING:
  - Reconnects people to their community and restores a sense of *pride in place*
  - Community realizes that these things should be done for themselves FIRST
  - A community full of pride automatically attracts tourists and new residents
  - Why is there no litter in Texas?
Things we’d do differently:

- More awareness before workshops
- Have residents do asset inventories
  - Disposable Camera Brigade
- Connect people with their own stories
- Collateral pieces to get the word out
- Familiarization tour
How does all of this really work?

• Interpretation is the tool or mechanism that puts your stories to work for you
INTERPRETATION: What is it?

- “...a communication process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of the audience and the meanings inherent in the resource.”

- from the National Association for Interpretation
Interpretation should:

• Provide more than just information
• Stir individuals to action
  – Tell the story of who you are
Interpretive Planning

• 1. Overview and interviews with key people; research and collection of stories
  – Use of folklorists

• 2. Interpretive plan goals and main themes
  • Themes: what are the main messages you want to repeat?
  • What are the core characteristics of your area?
Atchafalaya Trace Themes

• General Themes:
  – Dynamic relationship of man and nature
  – Ingenuity and resilience
  – Cultural convergence
    • Cultural expressions
    • Resources and their management
Interpretive Planning

• 3. Storyline development and interpretive sites
  – What individual stories help repeat the message of the themes?
  – What sites or resources actually tell these stories
    • Ex: sugar cane
Atchafalaya Trace
Storylines

• Levee construction and flood control
• Old River control system
• Multiple cultures and their interaction
• Music
• Hunting and fishing
• Pirogues
Interpretive Planning

4. Implementation strategies
   – Enhancing existing sites
   – New interpretive installations
   – Educational projects/lesson plans
   – Communication devices and media

5. Final Interpretive Plan
Interpretive Planning

- Visitor expects to see an alligator, taste gumbo, or eat crawfish
- Leave having experienced that, but also learning much more
Interpretation Elsewhere
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Interpretation Elsewhere

Journey Through a Land of Contrasts

The Mekenna Sliman story will help you get connected with the land.
Interpretation Elsewhere
In closing, remember...

- Your stories are your greatest asset.
- Infuse them into everything you and your community leaders do, and you’ll have:
  - A more authentic tourism product
  - A more livable and lovable community
  - A greater sense of pride in your residents
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