

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Heritage Area Management Plan

Mississippi Gulf Coast National Heritage Area
Hancock, Harrison, Jackson, George, Stone and Pearl River Counties,
Mississippi

INTRODUCTION

The Mississippi Gulf Coast National Heritage Area (Heritage Area) coordinating entity, the Mississippi Department of Marine Resources-- Comprehensive Resource Management Plan (MDMR-CRMP), working with guidance from the National Park Service (NPS), prepared a Draft Management Plan in August 2005 and an Environmental Assessment (EA) in 2007 for the Heritage Area. The Heritage Area encompasses the entire area within the State's six southernmost coastal counties: Hancock, Harrison, Jackson, George, Stone and Pearl River. The Heritage Area and coordinating entity were designated in 2004 by Public Law No. 108-447, § 8, 118 Stat. 3374 (2004). This legislative act required that the coordinating entity develop and submit a Management Plan for the Heritage Area to the Secretary of the Interior within 3 years of the date of the enactment of this act. As part of the management planning process for this Federal program, which utilizes Federal funding, the coordinating agency is required to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The NEPA planning process includes: 1) public involvement, 2) evaluation of different alternatives and their environmental consequences, and 3) selection of the preferred alternative (National Park Service, August 2007, Components of a Successful National Heritage Area Management Plan, Appendix A, Page 1).

The Management Plan for the Heritage Area provides a broad outline or blueprint for conserving resources and funding activities; and managing, interpreting, and developing awareness of cultural, historical, archaeological, natural and recreational resources through the pursuit of three primary goals and associated strategies designed to achieve these goals. The overall Management Plan relies heavily on Heritage Area sponsors and partners to implement the strategies or actions to achieve the goals with overarching guidance and networking provided by the coordinating entity and participatory input from the local communities, stakeholders and governmental entities. The EA evaluated two alternatives for the management of the Heritage Area.

SELECTED ALTERNATIVE

Overview

The selected alternative is the Corridor-Cluster alternative. Implementation of this alternative will provide a comprehensive and overarching means for managing the historic, cultural, natural and scenic resources located within the entire Heritage Area in order to achieve three major goals: 1) strengthen heritage identity, 2) conserve heritage resources, and 3) promote and market these resources to tourists and local inhabitants. This alternative

identifies five clusters of communities and eight networking corridors for which data would be compiled for use in development of interpretative programs and informational materials according to six themes (waterways of discovery, multi-ethnic nature, traditional lifeways, natural and scenic area, history, and arts and culture). Organizing and disseminating information on the Heritage Area resources within and adjacent to the clusters and corridors heightens recognition of the value of these resources and promotes awareness of a sense of place that further garners support for conserving these resources for current and future generations. Promoting and marketing these heritage resources would attract heritage tourists and provide both an economic means and an incentive to support additional research, generate a variety of educational materials and programs and conserve these resources.

The management program will facilitate conservation of the area's heritage resources through three primary strategies: 1) education (lifeways and folkways, customs and traditions, landscapes and scenic vistas, fostering pride and identity), 2) assistance regarding economic viability (eco-tourism, heritage tourism, heritage related businesses, festivals), and 3) collaboration through partnerships (fostering Smart Growth policies, adaptive re-use, linking people, places and programs).

Promotion and marketing of the Heritage Area will center around: 1) development and dissemination of informational materials, signage, and branding; 2) development of themed tours regarding cultural, historical and natural and scenic resources; 3) support for identification and development of visitor driving and hiking corridors and trails; 4) identification and characterization of heritage clusters and support and partnering for development of heritage related enterprises within the clusters; 5) guidance and support for interpretative centers and exhibits; and 6) advertising and networking among Heritage Area partners to leverage resources and maximize benefits.

The Corridor-Cluster alternative recognizes that there are geographically defined areas (clusters) and corridors within the Heritage Area that retain an assemblage of historical, cultural and natural resources that illustrate this area's important role in the nation's development. The clusters are cities or towns that are defined by their incorporated area boundaries and have a concentrated assemblage of features reflective of the area's unique history, traditions, lifeways, arts and crafts, and landscapes. The designated highway corridors traverse three distinct physiographic regions and cultural landscapes and link the clusters. The designation of corridors and clusters constitutes the framework for showcasing the historical, archaeological, cultural, natural and recreational resources of the Heritage Area and enables visitors and local citizens to experience the area in an organized, focused manner according to their interests, resources and time availability. Designated corridors with directional and interpretative signs and customized informational materials facilitate drive-through overviews that provide a sense of natural and cultural landscapes and a means to connect to specific areas of interest. The defined clusters are assemblages of heritage area resources that allow one to have a more in-depth experience through the touring of places (communities, buildings, cemeteries, museums, art galleries and districts, libraries and historic societies, working waterfronts, natural areas, rural life museums, public archaeological sites, shipbuilding facilities, etc.), the consumption of local foods, and the participation in heritage related festivals and recreational pursuits (ecological and heritage

tours, boating, fishing, horseback riding, hiking, biking, beach combing, bird watching, etc.) These experiences, enhanced through available information and guided tours, help one to understand and appreciate what makes the Heritage Area unique and its stories part of the Nation's story.

While each of the five clusters possess elements of the six themes identified in the Management Plan (waterways of discovery, multi-ethnic nature, traditional lifeways, natural and scenic areas, history, and arts and culture), they have unique combinations of heritage resources that distinguish them. Each cluster showcases key landscapes and environments and presents an opportunity for the conservation and interpretation of the area's individual history and culture. Under the Corridor-Cluster alternative, the Heritage Area resources will be researched and interpreted through development of information materials and tours. Through the use of logos and branding according to designated standards the Heritage Area components will be clearly identified and a quality experience would be sustained. Directional and interpretative signs and informational packages, including audio tapes, will facilitate self-guided tours. Financial and informational support for existing and renewed heritage related festivals will enhance the image of each cluster and help define the area's identity and sense of place. Financial support and partnerships for historical and archaeological investigations and oral history projects will document and further define the Heritage Area's history and culture before it is lost.

OTHER ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

Under Alternative A: No Action, there would be no active effort to either achieve the goals or pursue the strategies identified in the MDMR-CRMP for the already designated Heritage Area. The MDMR-CRMP would neither initiate further action as a coordinating entity nor seek to align with partners to develop and implement heritage related projects involving conservation of heritage resources, identification and interpretation of heritage area themes, preservation of stories and culture, development and dissemination of information materials, or promotion and marketing of the Heritage Area. There would be no overarching effort to brand the Heritage Area or foster connectivity among Heritage Area elements and entities. A summary of these environmental consequences is described for the following resources. The MDMR-CRMP would continue to adhere to its mission to "...develop a plan to sustain Mississippi's coastal resources and to provide a healthy economy in the coastal area" but would not expand the efforts to include the three counties of the designated Heritage Area that are outside of the lower coastal zone.

Environmentally Preferred Alternative

The environmentally preferred alternative is defined as "the alternative that will promote the national environmental policy expressed in NEPA (Sec. 101 (b))" (NPS, 1982, *The DO-12 Handbook*, pg. 22). This alternative also "causes the least damage to the biological and physical environment...and best protects, preserves, and enhances historic, cultural, and natural resources" (Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ). 1981. *Forty Most Asked Questions Concerning Council on Environmental Quality's National Environmental Policy Act Regulations*).

A qualitative comparison of Alternative A: No Action and Alternative B: Corridor-Cluster with regard to their ability to promote the national environmental policy, as stated in NEPA (Section 101 [b]), shows that Alternative B is the environmentally preferred alternative because it best meets the criteria in Section 101 (b). Because Alternative A continues existing conditions, it does not meet the criteria. Alternative B provides greater guidance, connectivity and leveraging ability for environmental interests to be more pro-active in creating or enhancing actions to conserve, preserve, and enhance the environment and associated qualities, as well as achieving a better balance between competing interests over resource use. See Table 3 of the EA for the qualitative ratings of the two alternatives.

WHY THE SELECTED ALTERNATIVE WILL NOT HAVE A SIGNIFICANT EFFECT ON THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

Summary of Environmental Consequences

Alternative B: Corridor-Cluster Alternative will have long-term beneficial effects on the natural and human environment through the implementation of strategies designed to strengthen the area's sense of heritage identity, conserve heritage resources and promote and market the 2.7 million acre Heritage Area. A summary of these environmental consequences is described for the following resources.

Geology. Raising awareness of the geologic features and landforms and the need to conduct activities, such as the extraction of mineral resources (oil, gas, sand, gravel, etc.), and other types of developmental activities, in an environmentally sound manner will have a medium, direct, long-term beneficial effect with regard to aiding in the conservation of the surface appearance or landscape of the Heritage Area. The existence of Heritage Area designation will also lend support for identification and protection of any unique geologic features and landforms that may be identified during the course of Management Plan implementation.

Water Resources. Implementation of the Corridor-Cluster alternative could have both medium to high, direct and indirect, long-term beneficial effects by heightening awareness of water resources and water quality issues and the need to conserve these resources. The increase in recreational activities involving water resources is expected to grow in coastal Mississippi and education activities undertaken as part of Heritage Area sponsored or supported programs could help promote more responsible use of water resources and maintenance or enhancement of water quality. The strategy of promoting Smart Growth policies could also maintain or improve water resources and water quality through actions taken by government and individual developers. The establishment of the Heritage Area also assists other groups to leverage funds to acquire wetlands and riparian habitat for water quality protection, enhancement, and greenspace views, as evidenced by some of the projects approved for Coastal Impact Assistance Program funding in 2007.

Vegetation and Wetlands. Implementation of the Corridor-Cluster alternative could have a high, long-term, beneficial effect on vegetation communities in general and wetlands in particular through: 1) education regarding past activities that had an adverse environmental

effect (e.g., clear-cut logging at the turn of the century), 2) promotion of Smart Growth policies that demonstrate sustainable renewable resources harvesting, sustainable land use practices, and best management practices, and 3) assistance to partnering entities for conservation of unique, rare or valuable vegetation communities through purchase of fee titles or easements, improvement of connectivity among existing natural conservation areas, development of guidelines and protocols to prevent overuse and degradation from public use, and education regarding wetland values and functions.

Fish and Wildlife Resources. Implementation of the Corridor-Cluster alternative could have medium to high, long-term, beneficial effects on wildlife and fisheries resources because of proposed strategy mechanisms directed towards strengthening the sense of heritage identity and conserving the area's heritage resources. For example, Mississippi has a rich heritage of seafood harvesting which is dependent on maintenance of not only high quality habitat and renewable resources, but also on shore-based support infrastructure, such as marinas, loading docks, and marketing and seafood processing establishments. Highlighting this heritage through development of educational and promotional materials and supporting maintenance of the facilities to meet both fishermen and heritage tourist interests keeps the focus on sustaining fisheries resources. Assisting in identification of eco-tour corridors and supplemental educational materials promotes awareness of the area's diversity of wildlife, and the attraction of heritage tourists, in addition to the enhancement of local interests, puts emphasis on the need to conserve these resources for future enjoyment.

Threatened and Endangered Species. A positive aspect of the implementation of the Corridor-Cluster alternative is the ability to network entities interested in the preservation of wildlife species and their habitat, especially those on the threatened or endangered species list, and to develop educational materials and awareness of the value of saving these species and their habitat, as well as other species that may be listed in the future. The synergistic educational and conservation actions of the network of special interests (wildlife and fisheries, threatened and endangered species, wetlands and wildlife and fisheries habitat, historians, tour groups, scientists, educators, Smart Growth proponents, etc.) working under the Heritage Area umbrella can result in a high, long-term, beneficial effect for threatened and endangered species.

Socio-economic Resources. Based on the results of implementation of Heritage Area programs in other areas, it is anticipated that the Corridor-Cluster alternative could have a low to medium, direct and indirect, long-term, beneficial impact on population, employment type and opportunities in the vicinity of heritage area attractions because of the strategies required for strengthening the sense of heritage identity, conserving heritage resources, and promoting and marketing the heritage area. A few positions may develop related to the development and dissemination of informational materials and educational/docent programs. Opportunities for restoration/repair activities related to conserving historic resources or readapting historic structures to modern uses could provide direct, short-term employment opportunities and longer-term employment opportunities related to their re-adaptive uses. The development of recreational/eco-/heritage tours could result in both additional seasonal and longer-term employment opportunities in both the highly developed coastal zone and the less developed northern portions of the Heritage Area. This latter action could aid in

retaining, and possibly recruiting, young people in historically rural, undeveloped areas and enhancing their pride and awareness of additional employment/entrepreneurial opportunities. Heritage tourism will also benefit local artists by providing a new venue for showing and selling their products. Heritage Area related employment and business related opportunities will add to the diversity of an area's economy, especially in more rural areas.

Aesthetic and Scenic Resources. Implementation of the Corridor-Cluster alternative will have low to high, direct and indirect, short-term and long-term beneficial effects depending upon the type and location of projects and activities associated with implementation of the Heritage Area Management Plan. An increased awareness and appreciation of the benefits of preserving aesthetic and scenic resources, as part of a larger strategy to promote and market to attract heritage tourists, could aid the conservation of these resources through increased availability of heritage generated and heritage affiliated funds.

Recreation Resources. The Corridor-Cluster alternative will have medium to high, direct and indirect, short-term and long-term beneficial effects for recreation depending upon the type and location of the recreational activity. Development or support of development of maps, tour guides, listings of types of recreational opportunities and associated amenities, directional and interpretative signage, and educational brochures on natural flora, fauna, and habitats and marketing of recreational opportunities would facilitate exploration of the natural and scenic resource areas, which in turn would focus attention on the importance of conserving, preserving and restoring such areas for future public and private uses. Other beneficial aspects of the Corridor-Cluster alternative could include the use of matching funds for re-adaptation of buildings within clusters for use as galleries, museums, education/interpretation centers or for development of interpretation programs and centers or support of docents to educate local inhabitants and visitors about a specific area, thereby enhancing the opportunities for recreational activities related to heritage related sightseeing, shopping, and entertainment. Leveraging of Heritage Area funds with other governmental, private and non-profit entities will help preserve and/or enhance more areas for nature trails, and public access to waterways, beaches and barrier islands for fishing and other water-oriented recreational activities. Such actions increase the number and diversity of recreational opportunities within the Heritage Area and help secure these opportunities for the future.

Cultural, Historic and Archaeological Resources. The selected alternative will have a high, direct and indirect, long-term beneficial effect on the cultural, historic and archaeological resources because of the overarching and connective programs that promote awareness of the value of resources and the need to preserve and conserve resources as part of development of heritage identity and promotion of the Heritage Area to tourists. This alternative will also facilitate measures to conserve and preserve historical and archaeological resources through studies, excavations, oral history recordings, re-adaptive uses of structures, and/or use of historic structures as tourist attractions; and support of cultural activities unique to the Heritage Area.

Heritage Area strategies for strengthening the sense of heritage identity will inspire and support documentation of history and culture through archival, document and archaeological

research, interpretation, and report production; recordation of people's experiences of traditional lifeways; and development of educational materials and programs to convey this knowledge to local inhabitants, tourists, and especially young people. The promotion and marketing of the Heritage Area will give added value and economic incentives for local private, non-profit and governmental interests to conserve the heritage related resources and support actions to strengthen heritage identity. It is anticipated that with knowledge and awareness there will be renewed respect for these resources and a desire to conserve them. Without Heritage Area programs and support for the arts (galleries, museums, music) there could be less incentive for re-adaptation and redevelopment in historic town centers. Networking heritage activities within and among cluster communities enhances the overall benefits of the program, provides a broader range of opportunities for the heritage tourists and maximizes the ability to articulate and promote the stories of the Mississippi Gulf Coast that have national importance.

The corridors identified in the Corridor-Cluster alternative are not only important links among the clusters of communities but they also have cultural, historic and archaeological resources that need further research and are worthy of interpretation. These corridors provide a means to convey the story of historic land use practices, such as lumbering, and provide access to the Heritage Area's bountiful recreational and scenic resources.

Strengthening the sense of heritage identity involves recognizing, recording, and presenting to the public the components of the Heritage Area. Identifying heritage resources and educating the public about them should help to conserve them indirectly by making developers, policy makers, elected officials, and the general public aware of their existence and significance. Heritage resources may be conserved more directly through partnerships between the Heritage Area and conservation groups such as The Nature Conservancy or the Land Trust for the Mississippi Coastal Plain. Education and conservation efforts may also reduce the threat to archaeological sites posed by looters as more people are educated about the significance of sites and as more sites are acquired and directly protected by conservation groups. While the efforts of the Heritage Area cannot protect historic buildings and archaeological sites from destructive natural forces, the Heritage Area can spearhead efforts to document these resources before any more are lost forever.

The Heritage Area can play a crucial role in guiding the region through the current period of unprecedented change. The Heritage Area provides the means for connecting various Federal, State, and private entities into a system of people and places that can collectively tell the story of the area. The Mississippi Gulf Coast was designated a Heritage Area because of its unique natural and cultural qualities. This official designation can now provide the organizational and monetary means to forefront these unique qualities and make sure that they are a benefit to the people of the area, in both an economic sense through heritage tourism and as a means for enhancement of community identity and pride. In the absence of the Heritage Area, the factors negatively affecting heritage resources will continue or likely accelerate their destruction of the sites, buildings, landscapes, and traditions that make the Mississippi Gulf Coast unique. The Heritage Area can play a role in guiding the changes that are occurring along the Coast so that these changes enhance the area's unique natural and cultural qualities. Conservation of the area's cultural, historic and natural resources is

essential for preservation of the Heritage Area's identity. While no area remains static through time, the efforts of the Heritage Area can ensure that the economic growth and viability of this area is achieved by considering conservation and heritage elements in planning for new development and not obliterating all vestiges of the past.

Air Quality. The Corridor-Cluster alternative could have low to medium, indirect, long-term beneficial effect on air quality through the support and awareness of Smart Growth policies that emphasize development of walking neighborhoods and more reliance on public transportation. These practices would benefit both old neighborhoods being rebuilt after the destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina and newer communities developing in the vicinity of major highway interchanges along the coast.

Noise. The Corridor-Cluster alternative could have low to medium, direct, short-term adverse effects where increased levels of tourism, especially activities requiring motorized boats or airboats, have the potential to increase noise levels on waterways and marshland. This potential adverse effect could be mitigated on the local level with development of protocols that minimize noise levels in natural areas or sensitive environments. Promotion of Smart Growth development, including neighborhoods and recreational areas that facilitate walking and bicycling, and public transportation could decrease the rate of increase in traffic noise that is expected to occur with continued growth of development and transportation corridors, especially along the lower Gulf Coast.

Hazardous, Toxic, and Radioactive Waste. The Corridor-Cluster alternative could potentially have medium to high, direct, long-term beneficial effects should clean-up of hazardous waste sites be inspired or supported through development or re-adaptive use as a result of interest and/or funding generated through the Heritage Area Management Plan implementation.

Impacts that May be Both Beneficial and Adverse

The selected alternative will have low to high, short and long-term benefits to the natural and human environment with potential adverse effects being mitigated. Actions that conserve and promote awareness of heritage resources would be beneficial but could result in "over-popularization" and "over use" of a heritage resource that could threaten its existence or authenticity. Proper implementation of mitigation according to established heritage use protocols developed under the guidance of the coordinating entity could minimize or avoid such adverse impacts.

Degree of Effect on Public Health and Safety

Implementation of the selected alternative could have a medium to high, direct and indirect and long-term beneficial effect on the quality of life within the Heritage Area through the enhancement of intellectual, cultural and recreational opportunities and the preservation and/or conservation of resources. Promotion and preservation of the quality of life in turn enhances public health and safety.

Unique Characteristics of the Geographic Area Such as Proximity to Historic or Cultural Resources, Park Lands, Prime Farmlands, Wetlands, Wild and Scenic Rivers or Ecologically Critical Areas

The six-county Heritage Area encompasses a vast array of historic and cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers and ecologically critical areas. Alternative B is intended to promote awareness, appreciation, wise use and conservation of the already designated areas as well as facilitate identification and protection of additional resources crucial to the area's heritage identity. By providing overall guidance and connectivity to a myriad of entities having a vested interest in the Heritage Area, this alternative helps ensure the Heritage Area's mission "...to promote understanding of and to conserve and enhance the heritage resources of the six counties of the Mississippi Gulf Coast by telling the area's nationally significant story to residents and visitors through activities and partnerships that celebrate the area's unique history, people, traditions and landscapes" (MDMR-CRMP & CEI. 2005. *Mississippi Gulf Coast National Heritage Area Management Plan*, Page 21).

Degree to Which Effects on the Quality of the Human Environment are Likely to be Highly Controversial

No issues were raised during the development and review of the Management Plan and the EA that would indicate any concerns regarding the effects on the quality of the human environment from the implementation of the alternative.

Degree to Which the Possible Effects on the Quality of the Human Environment are Highly Uncertain or Involve Unique or Unknown Risks

Implementation of Alternative B is designed to enhance the quality of the human environment by strengthening the sense of heritage identity, including a sense of pride of place; conserving heritage area resources; and improving local economies through the marketing of heritage related resources. The strategies selected to achieve these goals are standard operating procedures that have been employed in other heritage areas for over 20 years and do not involve unique or unknown risks or have highly uncertain outcomes. Furthermore, no concerns regarding possible effects on the quality of the human environment were expressed during the plan development or public review phase of this project.

Degree to Which the Action May Establish a Precedent for Future Actions with Significant Effects or Represents a Decision in Principle about a Future Consideration

Alternative B does not establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects nor does it represent a decision in principle about future considerations.

Whether the Action is Related to Other Actions with Individually Insignificant but Cumulatively Significant Impacts

The EA described numerous existing and proposed actions by government entities and non-profit organizations that are intended to conserve and protect natural and cultural resources,

promote awareness and understanding of the value of the resources, and provide a sense of place, uniqueness of heritage identity and enhanced quality of life. These synergistic activities should have medium to high, long-term cumulative beneficial consequences for inhabitants and tourists by providing a diverse array of heritage related resources and readily available opportunities to learn through active participation in genuine heritage themed experiences. Rather than directly promoting development within the Heritage Area, these complementary actions should be able to influence the developers to minimize adverse effects, practice Smart Growth, and incorporate and promote heritage area resources as an integral component of development.

Degree to Which the Action May Adversely Affect Districts, Sites, Highways, Structures, or Objects Listed on National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) or May Cause Loss or Destruction of Significant Natural, Cultural, or Historical Resources

Implementation of Alternative B would have medium to high, long-term beneficial consequences on districts, sites, highways, structures, and objects listed on the NRHP and natural, cultural and historical resources because it promotes awareness of and mechanisms for conserving and using these resources in a beneficial and financially sustaining manner. Actions taken under implementation would comply with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act.

Degree to Which the Action May Adversely Affect an Endangered or Threatened Species or its Critical Habitat

The direct actions of the coordinating entity to implement Alternative B would not involve the building of infrastructure (e.g., buildings, roads, trails, parking lots, marinas, etc.) that could adversely affect any endangered or threatened species or critical habitat in the Heritage Area. Any direct actions involving infrastructure undertaken by Heritage Area partners using Federal funds will require compliance with the NEPA process and Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act. Such actions would also require mitigation, including avoidance, of adverse effects on endangered or threatened species or critical habitat.

Whether the Action Threatens a Violation of Federal, State, or Local Environmental Protection Law

The selected alternative does not violate any Federal, State or local environmental protection law.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Preparation of the EA for the Heritage Area Management Plan is the latest stage in an ongoing public process to protect the natural and human environment of the Mississippi Gulf Coast while allowing for sustainable development. Starting in the mid-1990s, the MDMR-CRMP initiated a comprehensive resource management planning effort involving 11 Federal agencies, 11 State agencies, 26 local and county government agencies, 1 tribal government,

22 private and corporate entities that resulted in creation of a CRMP endorsed by planning participants.

Seeking designation of the six-county area as a heritage area was a logical outgrowth of the publicly oriented planning and decision making process initiated under the previous comprehensive resource management planning effort and was actively endorsed by local and count governing agencies, State and Federal congressional delegates and numerous conservation agencies and stakeholders. The MDMR-CRMP holds CRMP meetings approximately every 2 months in Biloxi to inform the public, government agencies, and other interested parties regarding issues and actions occurring in coastal Mississippi. These meetings, which are publicized through emails, the MDMR newsletter and local newspapers (*The Sun Herald*, *Bay Press*), served as a forum to disseminate information and solicit input about the Heritage Area designation and preparation of the Management Plan and EA. The CRMP meetings were held in February, April, August and December in 2005, in February, April, August, October and December in 2006 and in February, April, August, and October 2007 and February 2008.

With initiation of the effort in 2003 to have six counties in the Mississippi Gulf Coast declared a heritage area, the MDMR-CRMP has used their annual Smart Growth conferences as forums to publicize and establish partnerships for planning within the Heritage Area and implementation of the Heritage Area Management Plan. During the Smart Growth conferences, the MDMR-CRMP staff provided information and solicited input on both the Management Plan and the EA.

Approximately 500 copies of the Management Plan have been distributed at the CRMP meetings, Smart Growth Conferences, and meetings of the Heritage Area Commission, and mailed or hand-delivered to regulatory or other government agencies, Mississippi delegates to the U.S. Congress and Gulf Coast delegates to the Mississippi Legislature, with request for review and comment.

Copies of the draft EA (June 2007) were delivered to several government agencies (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Mobile District; U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Region 4; U.S. Department of Commerce, NOAA, Coastal Zone Management and Coastal Services Center; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of the Secretary, National Heritage Director, Southeast Regional Office, Park and Community Partnership Division, and Minerals Management Service) for review and comment. Copies were also provided to some of the initial participants in the designation and development of the Heritage Area (Mississippi Department of Marine Resources; Mississippi Department of Archives and History, State Historic Preservation Officer; Mississippi delegates to the United States Congress; and the Mississippi Gulf Coast delegates to the Mississippi Legislature) and to the 32 members of the Heritage Area Commission.

Comments received from the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDHA), State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) were incorporated into the EA. Additional comments on the EA were received from the Director of the Land Trust for the Mississippi Coastal Plain, the Mayor of the city of Biloxi, and the

Mayor of the city of Pascagoula. These letters were general statements supporting the Management Plan for the Heritage Area.

With designation of the Heritage Area in 2004, a 32-member Heritage Area Commission, consisting of representatives from each of the six counties in the Heritage Area, members of State and local government agencies, elected officials, business and industry representatives, a representative of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, members of conservation and tourist-affiliated organizations, environmental consultants and private citizens, was formed to assist the MDMR-CRMP in an oversight capacity for formulation and implementation of the Heritage Area Management Plan. The Heritage Area Commissioners also serve as liaisons between the Heritage Area's coordinating entity and the interests they represent. Heritage Area Commission meetings were held in March 2005 and February 2006. The MDMR-CRMP and its environmental consultant for preparation of the Draft Management Plan and EA solicited input and disseminated information regarding development of the Draft Management Plan and/or EA at these meetings, as well as through individual contacts with commission members.

Eleven Task Commissioners, representing the six Heritage Area counties, were selected from the 32 member Heritage Area Commission and actively participated in development of the Heritage Area Management Plan's mission statement, goals, strategies, heritage related resources, themes and initial list of projects. They are very familiar with the heritage resources, especially in their counties, and their input aided development of the alternative plan described in the EA. Meetings soliciting input from the Task Commissioners were held at MDMR-CRMP offices in Biloxi in March, April, May, June, and July of 2005, February and May of 2006 and August 2007. Individuals with expertise on particular resources and programs were contacted for information during development of the EA. The Task Commissioners continue to assist with identification of Heritage Area projects, potential partners for projects, and sources of matching funds and they help grow the Heritage Area within their county and the region.

With the approval of the NPS, hardcopies of the draft EA document and the Management Plan were placed in a public library in each of the six counties on February 11, 2008, for a 30-day public review and comment period along with instructions on where to submit comments:

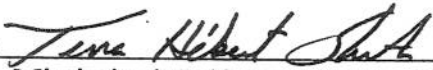
- Pascagoula Public Library, Pascagoula
- Lucedale-George County Public Library, Lucedale
- Margaret Sherry Memorial Library, Biloxi
- Bay St. Louis-Hancock County Public Library, Bay St. Louis
- Margaret Reed Crosby Memorial Library, Picayune
- Stone County Public Library, Wiggins.

A digital copy of the EA and the Management Plan were put on the MDMR-CRMP web site and a hardcopy of the documents were placed in the office of the coordinating entity, the MDMR-CRMP, in Biloxi for a 30-day review and comment period beginning on February 11, 2008. Under the Public Notice section of the MDMR web site the following citation


Public Notice: Mississippi Gulf Coast National Heritage Area Draft Environmental Assessment and Management Plan Available provided information on the Heritage Area, location of hardcopies of the two documents and instructions as to where to send comments or seek additional information. The Notice of Availability of the EA for review and comment was also published in *The Sun Herald* newspaper, the most widely distributed newspaper on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, on February 11, 2008.

CONCLUSION


We find that the selected alternative does not constitute a major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment. Therefore, in accordance with the NEPA and regulations of the CEQ (40 CFR 1508.9), an EIS will not be prepared for the project.

Recommended: 
Mississippi Gulf Coast National Heritage Area
Director: Tina Hebert Shumate

Date: 5/9/08


Mississippi Department of Marine Resources
William W. Walker PhD.
Executive Director

Date: 5/9/08

Approved: 
Acting
Regional Director, Southeast Region
National Park Service

Date: 5/20/08