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## Proposed O' Pioneers! National Heritage Area Briefing Paper

The University of Nebraska's Center for Great Plains Studies hosted a conference on tourism and conservation in the Great Plains April 18-20, 2018 called the *Great Plains Symposium* at the Younes Conference Center in Kearney, Nebraska. The Nebraska Tourism Commission (Agri/Ecotourism Workshop) and the Heartland Byways Annual Conference joined their annual events with the conference. The three combined conferences featured sessions for business leaders, ranchers, and community partners for a wide discussion about "how to preserve the stunning bounty of the Great Plains ecology."

The University of Nebraska's Center for Great Plains Studies argues that what the Center terms "responsible nature-based tourism" offers a strategy to "simultaneously save the region's natural marvels, benefit landowners, and sustain thriving rural communities." The Center "seeks to create allies of groups—environmentalists, business owners, and land owners—sometimes cast as adversaries." One nonprofit organization they tout is the American Prairie Reserve, which is developing a large-scale grasslands restoration and rewilding effort in Montana that is actively engaged in establishing the largest free-range bison herd in North America.

Buried deep in the program for the conference was information on a panel discussion of something called the O! Pioneers National Heritage Area (NHA). The panel was moderated by University of Nebraska-Lincoln Professor of Landscape Architecture, Kim Wilson. The panel abstract starts:

Heritage tourism is an opportunity for rural communities to reverse declining jobs, populations, incomes, and quality of life amenities. We discuss a comprehensive approach to tourism including cultural, heritage, agricultural, and ecotourism to build on a community's assets, diversify its economy, and attract new business. Red Cloud is home to a world class cultural asset as the childhood home of Willa Cather and the setting for many of her works. While significant cultural heritage tourism development exists, Red Cloud, in partnership with a larger regional strategy including more than 130 cultural assets, has a greater potential where smart and aggressive investment in tourism could significantly increase the economic and cultural impact on the region.

A local newspaper, the *Kearney Hub*, published an article on April 21<sup>st</sup> titled, *Potential seen for Nebraska-Kansas National Heritage Area*<sup>1</sup>. The article began with Professor Wilson saying, "We're going to talk about a really big idea." The big idea is a possible national heritage area designation for a 36,356-square-mile area of southern Nebraska and northern Kansas that would encompass 25 counties in each state bordered on the north by I-80, on the south by I-70, on the east by Beatrice, and on the west by McCook. This area includes several KNRC member counties.

On April 25<sup>th</sup>, KNRC staff were contacted by Kathy Wilmot, who had been referred to us by Norman Kincaide, who along with Colorado State Representative Kimmi Lewis and others, had defeated a proposed NHA that would have been designated in southeastern Colorado. Kathy is the Nebraska state lead for the Eagle Forum, and wanted to know more about the NHA being proposed for Nebraska and what can be done about it.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.kearneyhub.com/news/agriculture/potential-seen-for-nebraska-kansas-national-heritage-area/article\\_4caef228-4515-11e8-90ab-efcb1cb3bc37.html](http://www.kearneyhub.com/news/agriculture/potential-seen-for-nebraska-kansas-national-heritage-area/article_4caef228-4515-11e8-90ab-efcb1cb3bc37.html)

The National Park Service (NPS) defines national heritage areas<sup>2</sup> as:

National Heritage Areas (NHAs) are designate by Congress as places where natural, cultural, and historic resources combine to form a cohesive, nationally important landscape. Through their resources, NHAs tell nationally important stories that celebrate our nation's diverse heritage. NHAs are lived-in landscapes. Consequently, NHA entities collaborate with communities to determine ho to make heritage relevant to local interests and needs.

NHAs are a grassroots, community-driven approach to heritage conservation and economic development. Through public-private partnerships, NHA entities support historic preservation, natural resource conservation, recreation, heritage tourism, and educational projects. Leveraging funds and long-term support for projects, NHA partnerships foster pride of place and an enduring stewardship ethic.

Although NHA legislation includes statements on the protection of private property rights, we have to recognize that while much of the land in the western states is under federal agency management, the same is not true of the plains states. There is an ever-increasing drumbeat from the conservation NGOs to protect the remaining prairie grasslands and to restore as much of those lands to pre-settlement conditions as possible. Because so much of the Great Plains is in private ownership, NHA designation offers a powerful foot in the door in that direction. With its emphasis on ecotourism, we would at the very least expect conservation NGO pressure on counties to intensify land use regulation for "viewshed" protection throughout the NHA, should one be Congressionally designated.

Although the proposed O' Pioneers NHA proponents have not yet initiated the necessary feasibility study that would precede introduction of a Congressional bill to designate the NHA, significant effort has been put into research of the fifty-county region. A comprehensive, if preliminary strategic plan has been developed and is available for download from the Red Cloud, Nebraska tourism website<sup>3</sup>. The extraordinarily detailed nature of this report/plan is indicative of deep-pocket funding.

If the project moves forward and the feasibility study demonstrate positive results, the next step would be for a Senator or Member of Congress to introduce a bill that would designate the NHA, if passed and signed by the President. A successful outcome there would be followed by the NPS naming management entity to develop a management plan for the NHA. Once completed, the plan must be approved by the Secretary of the Interior before it can be implemented. From a 2012 memorandum to "all employees" from the NPS Director:

[The] National Heritage Areas Program is one that NPS "manages" and which "form a vital part of the NPS mission . . . Through the facilitation of a local coordinating entity – which may be a Federal commission, nonprofit group, or State agency or authority – this Program provides assistance to resident so fa region to improve their quality of life by protecting their shared cultural and natural resources . . . The work of each heritage area is guided by a management plan approved by the Secretary of the Interior.

During the previous administration, the NPS website's *A Call to Action* section sought to "identify a national system of parks and protected sites (rivers, heritage areas . . .) that are not currently protected" and to "promote large landscape conservation."

The KNRC staff is researching the proposed NHA and monitoring developments, as well as the impacts to local governments and human environments where NHAs have already been established. Approaches for local government engagement are also being considered.

*The Kansas Natural Resource Coalition (KNRC) is an association of counties who maintain collective and participatory involvement in administrative government on behalf of its citizenry. The Coalition serves as a conduit between local, state and federal governments to promote balanced, necessary and effective administrative policymaking through the mechanism of government-to-government coordination. Our mission is to monitor, analyze, understand, communicate, and participate in those initiatives that materially affect the natural or human systems governed by individual member counties.*

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nps.gov/articles/what-is-a-national-heritage-area.htm>

<sup>3</sup> [Regional Cultural Heritage Tourism. University of Nebraska-Lincoln](#)