

National Park Service

Interpretive Themes

National Heritage Area Interpretive Theme Primer

National Heritage Area Interpretive themes provide a framework for all aspects of an area's interpretive programming. Interpretive themes are designed to accommodate and respond to a range of stories, perspectives, ongoing scholarship, and evolving needs and attitudes of society. The following is a primer on interpretive themes — what they are, what they are not, how to evaluate them, and how to recognize a useful theme.

What are Interpretive Themes?

- National Heritage Area interpretive themes are organization tools that further explain the area's national importance. They define the framework for an area's interpretive programming.
- Well constructed themes encourage exploration of the context in which the events occurred and the effects of those events. They go beyond a mere description of events to foster multiple opportunities to think critically about the many complexities—the “shades of gray” and multiple perspectives—of the events, stories, and issues represented by an area. In other words, interpretive themes are designed to serve as a vehicle that allows exploration of the question—“So what do the places, people and events of the past have to do with me and my times?” Themes help explain why the stories of a place are relevant to people who are unconnected to it.
- While themes are important as a conceptual framework to guide interpretation management decisions, they are not intended as a reflection of everyone's desire to have all the stories of a place told. The themes represent an internal infrastructure and a measure for interpretation, but what matters to public appreciation and understanding of our nation's special places is how themes are fulfilled and presented through media and personal services programming.

Interpretive Themes Are...

- Derived from a heritage area's national importance and capture the essence of the area's nationally important landscape.
- Capture and convey the *meaning* of a heritage area's resources or the events which comprise major facets of its heritage.
- Statements that open minds to new ideas and allow for or introduce multiple points of view.
- Descriptive statements that inspire connections to resource meanings by expressing relevant ideas, meanings, concepts, beliefs, and values that increase audience understanding and appreciation of a heritage area's stories.
- Designed to be broad and inclusive statements that help to organize material and accommodate new information as it comes to light. Individual stories and concepts included within the themes may change more frequently, but if designed well, interpretive themes remain relatively stable over an extended period of time.
- Links to universal human experiences that transcend time and culture (“intangible” values) with the actual tangible resources of a heritage area and its stories. An interpretive theme should be area-specific and not be so broad as to apply to many other heritage areas as well.
- Designed to provide a foundation for individual programs, site interpretation, media presentations, and exhibit themes. These program-level and interpretive media themes can be more specific than the overall heritage area themes but must relate to them by nesting under one or more of them. In effect, each resource of a heritage area is part of a larger context that reflects the nationally distinctive landscape within which each site plays a part.

- Inclusive of a range of stories that can be addressed to illustrate and fit under the umbrella of a particular theme.
- Expressed in a single sentence.

Interpretive Themes Are Not ...

- Topics
- Statements of fact
- Chronological periods of time
- Expressed in a single word; especially words such as "people", "nature", "change", or "environment".
- Categories that could apply to many other resources such as "the man", "his work", "his legacy". A theme would instead describe what it was about the man, his work, or his legacy that make them important in the context of a particular place.
- Statements that could easily apply to other areas. For example, "the environment influenced man" and "man influenced the environment." Themes should be area-specific and describe the influences or their effect; i.e. describe exactly what it is about those influences that happened in that particular region that make them nationally distinct.
- Expressed in several sentences or a paragraph. A theme should be expressed in a single sentence. More than one sentence can indicate that it isn't a theme.

Indications That the Right Themes Have Not Yet Been Identified — Cautions and Tests:

- If a theme is so general that it could be applied as a theme or concept in many other places, it isn't yet the right theme. The theme should be specifically linked to an area and its nationally important story and capture why that place should be designated a National Heritage Area.
- If an interpretive theme is so narrow that it prevents exploration or discussion of other points of view it isn't yet the right theme. If that narrow view has to be balanced by a separate theme describing the other side of the same concept it is an indication that the first theme should be revised to be broader and more inclusive.
- An area's topics and stories should have a natural "fit" under at least one of the interpretive theme concepts. There should be no unnatural or awkward fits. There should be no leftover topics that don't fit under any theme. If stories don't fit, the right themes haven't yet been identified.
- Since themes embody broad concepts and help inspire connections, three to four of them, well-crafted, will generally encompass an area's story, however complex that story may be. More than three themes (and certainly five or more) usually indicate that the right themes haven't yet been identified.
- If the themes are well crafted, there should be no need for "secondary" themes. Secondary themes are a strong indication that the appropriate themes have not yet been developed or identified. Sometimes a secondary theme is proposed as a solution to a political or special interest rather than being grounded in a nationally distinct landscape. More often, a proposed secondary theme is instead a specific program-level or interpretive media presentation theme that should nest within the broader site interpretive themes.