



Proposed Lone Star Coastal National Recreation Area Integrating History and Nature

The Historic Strand, Galveston. Photo © Bob Howen.

Hurricane Ike tore through the upper Texas Gulf coast in 2008, unleashing devastation on communities and economies. Yet portions of the region fared better, showing that undeveloped lands along the coast serve as a natural buffer for a tremendous amount of storm surge tide, reducing flooding and property damage to inland communities.

Creating a new national recreation area within this coastal buffer zone has been proposed as one strategy for capitalizing on the economic value of the area's natural, cultural, and historical sites while ensuring long-term flood protection. A study of potential economic impacts for a four-county coastal region finds the proposed Lone Star Coastal National Recreation Area could offer nearly \$200 million in annual economic benefits from recreation and heritage tourism.

A national recreation area would offer a singular opportunity to weave the region's outdoor recreation appeal together with its historical and cultural attractions to create a high-profile destination for national and international travelers.

Opportunities to Connect History and Nature

Research and interviews with local leaders suggest the proposed Lone Star Coastal National Recreation Area would be rich in opportunities to link heritage tourism with outdoor recreation and nature tourism and activities.

1 Interpret history and nature at the same site

For example, Varner-Hogg Plantation State Historical Park is also a prime birding site, with opportunities for cross-promotion and interpretation. Fort Travis Seashore Historic Park, Galveston Island State Park, and other sites provide similar opportunities.

2 Integrate existing efforts

The region is part of the Texas Independence Trail and the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail. These existing efforts have identified sites and routes, which could be used in developing a more integrated approach.

3 Build interpretation into hands-on activities

Fishing, crabbing, and oystering activities and services could include historical and cultural components.

4 Develop new interpretive themes

Some aspects of the area's history have been largely untold. Relationships between people and nature could be a key interpretive theme of the national recreation area, incorporating significant natural- and cultural-history components

5 Make physical connections

Use connecting trails to promote nonmotorized access between and through historical sites and natural areas.



Festivals such as the Texas Crab Festival can weave together nature, history, and local culture. Photo: © Bob Howen.

History and Nature Tourism are Complementary

Weaving together nature, history, and culture is not a new idea, as the following examples of existing programs and activities from the region suggest. A national recreation area could promote more of this type of integration.

- The Galveston Historical Foundation offers historic harbor tours with dolphin watching, as well as hands-on environmental science and ornithology tours.
- Visitors to the Texas SeaPort Museum explore a century and a half of fishing heritage through exhibits on the shrimping industry, seamanship demonstrations and trainings, and tours of the 1937 shrimp boat, Santa Maria.
- Touring the tree sculptures is the seventh most popular Galveston attraction on TripAdvisor. These trees killed by hurricane tidal flow have been turned into chainsaw art.
- As part of its efforts to promote nature-based education and recreation, the Galveston Island Nature Tourism Council is working with the Daughters of the Texas Republic to highlight the natural features of a small site with historical roots in pirate history. Known in the 1800s as Laffite's Grove, the site is rich in natural habitat and wildlife as well as historical connections to the privateer, Jean Lafitte, and the Galveston Railroad.

Examples from across the country suggest that history, culture, nature, and recreation can together create a powerful appeal for locals and visitors.

- At the Achafalaya National Heritage Area in Louisiana, visitor surveys revealed a strong desire for outdoor recreation opportunities, especially among younger visitors.

Although best-known for its plantation homes, the National Heritage Area expanded its promotion to focus on ecotourism. It created an outdoor-recreation section on its website that includes information on birding, paddling, cycling, and golfing, and has reached out to local paddling and cycling clubs.

- Gateway National Recreation Area in New York includes many former military sites, including Fort Hancock. This fort once guarded the New York Harbor entrance. The national recreation area maintains historical exhibits on the fort's grounds and hosts an annual Fort Hancock Days celebration. Visitors can stroll along trails and beaches, as well as explore military history.

Coordinated Marketing of Heritage Tourism Pays Off

- Collaborative marketing along the Crooked Road music heritage trail in Virginia doubled lodging sales in the first four years. Music events grew five percent per year, and the region's share of Virginia tourism expanded by two percent.
- For the Civil War 150th anniversary, the Journey Through Hallowed Ground National Heritage Area trained thousands of tourism employees as ambassadors. The training enabled them to encourage visitors to stay longer by guiding them to other sites within the heritage area.
- At 14 rural museums along Montana's "Dinosaur Trail," visitation grew more than 14 percent during the first two years of coordinated promotion.

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