Charting a Future for National Heritage Areas

A Report by the National Park System Advisory Board
In the southwestern corner of Arizona, not far from the Mexican border, lay a forlorn stretch of the Colorado River. Although one would never know it by looking, these were once thriving wetlands. Now they are starved of freshwater and choked by nonnative vegetation, creating a place to avoid, not enjoy. Past efforts to restore the area have failed as a patchwork of landownership and conflicting viewpoints made finding common ground difficult.

That has all changed, thanks to a groundbreaking public-private partnership effort. Established in 2000, the Yuma Crossing National Heritage Area commemorates Yuma’s role in the history of American transportation and trade as a key crossing point over the Colorado River. The heritage area brings together farmers and other landowners, private citizens, members of the Quechan and Cocopah Indian nations, state and federal agencies, and municipal officials to promote heritage preservation and environmental conservation. The partnership has drawn on the strengths of its various cultures to achieve far-reaching goals.

The heritage area’s interpretive themes include Yuma’s importance as a cultural crossroads, emphasizing the region’s intersection of three major cultures: Anglo, Hispanic, and Native American. The heritage area recognizes that this rich blend of traditions can best be sustained by their continued expression through architecture, music, food, and other folkways.

Recently, the heritage area championed a multiyear, multimillion-dollar endeavor to restore habitat and water flow to the East Wetlands. In 2004, heritage area partners secured a Clean Water Act permit from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to begin restoration work. More than 200 acres of nonnative vegetation have since been cleared, and more than 130 acres have been replanted with cottonwoods, willows, mesquites, native grasses, and palo verde trees. A 1-mile length of back channel has also been excavated, and some 20,000 new trees are expected to be planted in 2006. To date, 10 different funding sources have provided almost $6 million towards the eventual goal of $8 to $20 million to complete the project.

A forgotten backwater is now a special place to paddle a canoe and enjoy the view of the recently restored historic Ocean-to-Ocean Bridge. The citizens of Yuma and the tribal nations are once again reconnected to an integral piece of their heritage, the Colorado River.