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Cultural Heritage Initiative Feasibility Assessment: Centralia, Pennsylvania

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Cultural Heritage Initiative Feasibility Assessment: Centralia, Pennsylvania

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Bucknell University

Geography 326

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Cultural Heritage Initiative Feasibility Assessment

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Introduction

The Bucknell University's Geography 326 class of 2017 had the goal of assisting the Mt. Carmel region with revitalization efforts in the area as a semester initiative. When deciding on which initiative to go with, the class held a town meeting in Mt.. Carmel to hear any suggestions that the residents had for possible initiatives. Amongst the suggestions, the notion of preserving the famous nearby ghost town of Centralia as a protected park to attract tourism to the region was presented as a possible endeavor. After considering all options presented at the meeting, the class decided that the Centralia Park idea was most applicable to their skill sets.

The thesis of the project is that the region of Mt.. Carmel could better benefit from the influx of tourists that comes in daily for Centralia if there is a structural architecture to present and preserve the cultural heritage of Centralia and the immediate region. The impact of this initiative relies upon the relationship that the surrounding communities of the lower Anthracite coal region have with each other in their interconnected histories. Our goal is to assess the feasibility of revitalizing the anthracite coal region by preserving the cultural heritage of Centralia as a protected state park. This report provides the groundwork for a three-fold impact:

- 1) Providing the potential framework to help capture and promote the influx of tourism into the region in a respectful and proactive way that highlights Centralia's rich history
- 2) Preserve and celebrate the historical culture of the Anthracite coal region and communities surrounding Centralia (Mt. Carmel, Pioneer Tunnel, etc.)
- 3) Encourage economic growth surrounding touristic markets (guided tours, museums, ATV maintenance, B&B, etc.)

Where

Anthracite Region

The anthracite coal region is a historically important coal mining area of Northeastern Pennsylvania and encompasses six counties: Carbon, Columbia, Lackawanna, Luzerne, Northumberland, and Schuylkill Columbia County. This region contains the only reserves of United States anthracite coal, which was heavily mined throughout the 19th and early 20th century. The region is also the largest most concentrated anthracite deposit in the world and 480 square miles of coal bearing rock which originally held 22.8 billion short tons (20.68 billion tons) of anthracite. The anthracite mining industry dominated the region until its decline in the 1950s. Strip mines and fires, most notably in Centralia remain visible.

The Anthracite region holds some significant historical, scientific, geographical and cultural heritage that would be of national and worldwide interest. We believe that the National Mining Association and other coal mining organizations could be interested in the historical value of preserving and benefiting from any revitalization of the area. We believe that Mt. Carmel can promote this unique legend as somewhat of a state destination, while preserving the anthracite region's cultural heritage.

Centralia

Founded in 1866, Centralia is in the middle of Pennsylvania's anthracite coal mining county of Columbia. In 1962, a fire tore through an abandoned strip mine, causing a chain reaction when it broke through a rock pit, setting the rest of the town's coal mines alight. The government and town was unable to quell the flames, and the underground has been a furnace ever since. With over 1000 residents in 1980 to fewer than 10 in 2010 it is now considered a ghost town. It may be considered an involuntary park – an area that has lost its value, been

abandoned due to environmental and economic reasons, subsequently returning to a park-like status. Today only a very small handful of die-hard residents hold on to their houses. Few homes remain standing and most of the abandoned buildings have been demolished by the Columbia County Redevelopment Authority or reclaimed by nature.

In saying this, there is great potential for public/state recognition of the area, as it embodies more than enough history and culture from the earlier mining industry. Movies, documentaries, books and websites have been created about the transformation of Centralia from a once thriving mining community to a current day ghost town. This media attention could be used to assist our project of capturing and promoting tourism to the region. Careful and respectful managed heritage tourism would give this ghost town a second life while generating a new economy able to support the residents of the region. It is possible that owing to its accessibility and proximity to other locations such as Mt. Carmel, Centralia could experience an economic and vacation population surge.

Mt. Carmel

Mount Carmel was a regional marketplace for its residents with a distinctive commercial core and surrounding residential neighborhoods to house its peak population of 17,967 in 1930. Mount Carmel could even boast the world's first home to be lighted by electricity in 1884. While the commercial core has lost many original buildings to demolition or alteration, some banks, churches, ethnic clubs and private residences remain in Mount Carmel which illustrates the wealth and prosperity of the community that existed in the late 19th and early 20th century. Mount Carmel is in some ways a community living in its own shadow, now possessing about one third of its peak population. (The 2010 census population was 5,893 down from 17,967 at its peak.)

This decline in population in recent years has created many blighted housing and socio-economic issues. In the past, there was extensive anthracite mining interests here and in the vicinity, which sustained the growth and prosperity of the township. In later years, however, the town has experienced a lack of industry and initiative in which it desperately needs to survive. We strongly believe that the borough of Mt. Carmel needs to use this rich history as a source of attraction to the area, possibly in association with Centralia as a focus point. Mt. Carmel could do this by emphasizing the architectural and cultural resources which make it a special place in the region.

What & How

In order to successfully preserve the land in Centralia, and establish subsequent tourism infrastructure in or around the borough, we are proposing three possible initiatives. These include but are not limited to a (1) preserved site, (2) state park, (3) cultural heritage site.

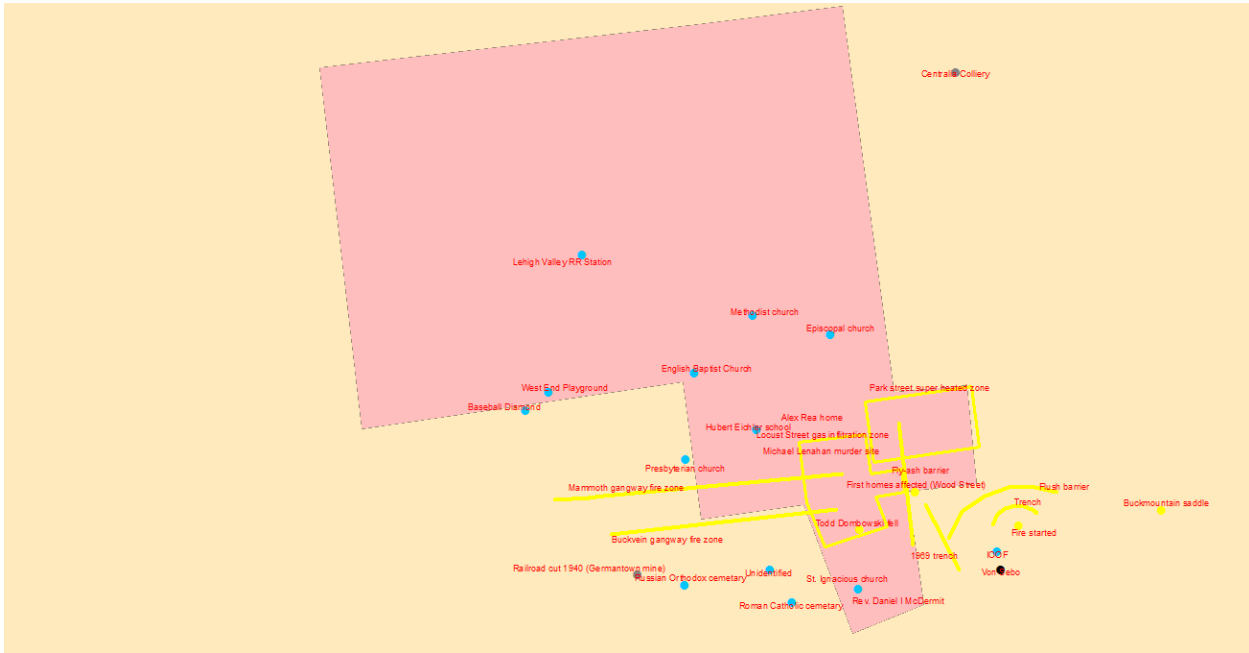


Figure 1: This graphic depicts the borough of Centralia via GIS, with potential points of interests if a tourism route were to be established. These locations were provided by Casey McCracken, a local who is quite familiar with the Centralia and its history

Preserved Site

The first initiative that we are proposing is the establishment of land in or around Centralia as a preserved site. This initiative would be made possible through the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (PHMC). The PHMC is a governmental agency in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania that is responsible for the collection, conservation, and interpretation of Pennsylvania’s historic heritage. Their vision, as stated on their website, is to enrich people’s lives by helping them to understand Pennsylvania’s past, to appreciate the present, and to embrace the future. We believe that this is exactly what Centralia, and more broadly the anthracite coal region, needs: an agency that is dedicated to preserving its history and showing it to the world. With regards to funding this endeavor, the PHMC is willing to distribute grants to nonprofit organizations and local governments. Unfortunately, the PHMC does not administer grants to private homeowners, which may work against the families who currently reside on land in Centralia that has been condemned by the state. To combat this stipulation,

perhaps the local government could consult with these homeowners, and work together to reach a solution that is beneficial to both the state, current residents, and their descendants.

The process of creating a preserved site starts with filling out a form on the PHMC website (see Appendix 1). The form requires basic contact information, as well as a short synopsis of the reason of contact. The commission will then respond to the inquiry within seven days. Another option would be to travel to the executive office in Harrisburg, submit a proposal on behalf the preferred preserved site initiative, and if needed submit an application for grant funding.

State Park

A state park is a protected area managed at the sub-national level within nations that use ‘state’ as a political subdivision. For the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, the PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (PA DCNR) could be a beneficial resource. The PA DCNR’s mission, per their website, is to conserve and sustain Pennsylvania’s natural resources for present and future generations’ enjoyment. The issue that we see arising with this initiative is making the case that Centralia has natural resources to protect (preservation of natural resources is a mandatory stipulation for establishing a state park). Centralia and towns like it were once full of coal, but since mining no longer occurs, there may be some barriers to how much assistance the DCNR may be willing or able to offer. State funding is available this endeavor, but it may take more work and convincing than the other two proposed initiatives. Nonetheless, it is still an avenue through which the state may be willing to offer some financial assistance, if the legislators representing the borough are able to construct a proposal that presents a convincing argument for the establishment of a state park.

We were not able to identify a single path to the establishment of a state park, but from doing research on other state park initiatives, we concluded that the best way to approach this initiative would be to draft a proposal and present it to a local or state legislative elected representative. The representative would then serve as the intermediary between the people of the coal region/Centralia, and the DCNR which establishes and maintains state parks in the Commonwealth.

Cultural Heritage Site

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is known for its work in determining the locations of world heritage sites. These sites are usually monuments, or some other physical manifestation of a particular culture. However, UNESCO is also very much involved in preserving intangible cultural heritage as well, which may be difficult for some to comprehend because it often times it is not physical. Rather, UNESCO defines intangible cultural heritage as traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants. These may include oral traditions, social practices, rituals, etc. There is no virtually no limit to what can be coined as intangible cultural heritage. Centralia may not be as intriguing enough on an international level so as to receive recognition from UNESCO as a world cultural heritage site, but Centralia and the entire anthracite coal region is very important to Pennsylvania's history, and that of the nation's industrial revolution.

From our research, we were able to find a program called the Pennsylvania Heritage Area Program (PHAP). In 1989, this organization started to push their initiative of conserving and enhancing key resources as well as promoting a region's heritage for tourism development. There are 12 heritage areas in the state of Pennsylvania, and some of them are within the counties that make up the coal region. We believe that establishing a cultural heritage center in

Centralia is the most feasible of the options presented. The other two are very possible, but we feel that the vision of PHAP is most in line with what our contacts in Mt.. Carmel/Centralia wish to see in their community. There is a contact form on PHAP's website (see Appendix 2) where individuals interested to establishing their area as a heritage center can reach out to the PHAP organization. They should respond promptly and provide information regarding their willingness and ability to act on the proposed initiative.

Our Recommendation

Based upon the research our team has committed to the subject, we recommend that the people of Mt.. Carmel attempt to establish the anthracite coal region as a cultural heritage area. There have been other success stories across the state, and the other regions are also tied to a history of resource extraction e.g. Oil Region National Heritage Area and Lumber Heritage Area. The anthracite coal region is just as important, if not more important, especially in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Not only will this initiative shed light on Centralia, but also other boroughs and counties that make the coal region, as opposed to the preserved site which would only include Centralia or a state park that doesn't really place as much emphasis on cultural heritage when compared to the preservation of natural resources.

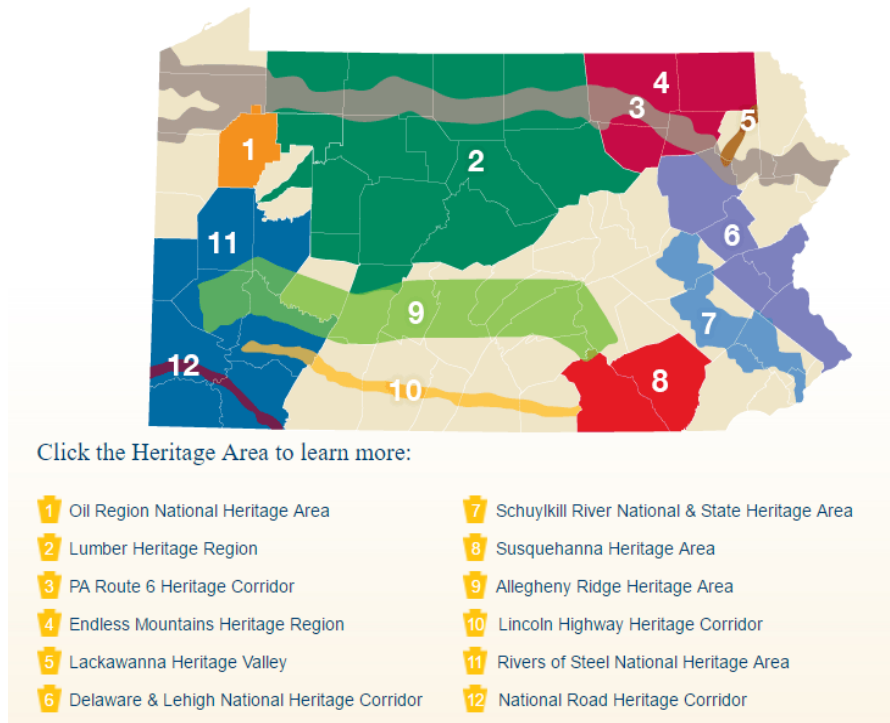


Figure 2: Link to site: <http://heritagepa.com/map/> This graphic depicts a map of the 12 heritage areas in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Notice that the Anthracite Coal region is both unmarked as a region and unrepresented as a heritage theme of coal culture

After further research, our team also discovered that there are other parties that are making very similar proposals such as this one. In 2016, a conference was held by the Eastern Pennsylvania Coalition for Abandoned Mine Reclamation (EPCAMR), and the MikeKorb LLC organization gave a presentation on the benefits of having an “Anthracite Heritage Area.” This has led to the creation the *Anthracite Coal Heritage Alliance* which aims to bolster the initiative of creating an anthracite heritage region. The entire presentation is quite compelling and in-line with what our group is proposing.

You can find the entire presentation online below:

https://www.slideshare.net/MichaelHewitt4?utm_campaign=profiletracking&utm_medium=sssite&utm_source=ssslideview



Figure 3: For more information, visit https://www.slideshare.net/MichaelHewitt4?utm_campaign=profiletracking&utm_medium=sssiter&utm_source=ssslideview

Why

Cultural Heritage Preservation

Initiatives like this are common, such protected cultural sites include Mammoth Cave National Park in Kentucky, or Granite Ghost Town State Park in Montana. Even Pioneer Tunnel nearby is of a similar theme that encompasses the Centralia story. And it's because of this story that at any given day, there are multitudes of visitors, educators, students, documentarists, historians, tourists, and others that pour into this coal region to take in the legends of the cultural history here. What this proposal can provide is a *structural net* to capture and guide these incoming persons in a safe, respectful, and productive way that benefits both visitor and resident of the coal region. Centralia is just one of many stories that are being sought out in this coal region (Molly Maguire trials, the Whaleback Oddity, Pioneer Tunnel, etc.), and we believe that Centralia can be the flagship project that helps promote those surrounding legacies as well. Additionally, the 250th anniversary of Anthracite Coal is coming up in 2018, along with cultural heritage conferences in Wilkes Barre on June 22, 2017, and tours of the Scranton Coal Museum as well.

Structural Benchmarking

When looking at other local models to benchmark potential best practices to, the options of similar initiatives were limited for the amount of time our team had. However, we believe there are a few examples that are close enough in nature, structure, and mission that serve as relative benchmarks for the cultural heritage initiative in Centralia. The Anthracite Outdoor Adventure Area (AAOA) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that is a recreationally focused initiative near the Centralia region. Our team was able to meet with their grant writer Kathy Jeremiah to discuss similarities and suggestions that our proposal could benefit from knowing. First, establishing a relationship with Columbia County's Planning Commission Director Robert Aungst, and working through that department to reach out to the state government officials that could help implement a "master plan" as was done for AAOA. Additionally, our team was able to reach out to ex-Pennsylvania Senator Gordon Denlinger and ex-Pennsylvania Governor Dick Thornburgh to gauge the level of political approval and were met with positive reception.

Economic Impacts/Tourism

Outdoor recreation is an enormous industry not only in Pennsylvania but around the country. According to a 2012 impact study from the Outdoor Industry Association, outdoor recreation generates billions of dollars in revenue; Outdoor recreation produces \$21.5 billion in consumer spending, \$1.6 billion in state and local tax revenue, and \$7.2 billion in wages and salaries. This industry sustains approximately 219,000 Pennsylvanian jobs. These are massive numbers, so let's break down the industry in terms of the plausible tourist sites Centralia can become: State Parks and Preserved/Cultural Heritage Sites.

Pennsylvania Heritage Areas were created to preserve the unique history and heritage around Pennsylvania, much to the likes of Centralia. These sites frequently include museums,

tours, and other infrastructure to benefit of the visitors. In 2014 the twelve heritage sites in Pennsylvania supported 7.5 million visitors that purchased \$2 billion worth of goods and backed 25,708 jobs. On average a heritage site provides around 2,500 jobs and \$14 million in tax revenue. (See Appendix 3 for details) The addition of jobs and tax revenue will certainly boost the economy of Mt. Carmel and other communities surrounding the Heritage site. The other plausible tourist site Centralia could become is a State Parks. This too could have tremendous economic impact for the community of Mt. Carmel.

In 2010, 38 million people visited Pennsylvania state parks and spent \$859 million on their trips. Pennsylvania State parks provided \$397.8 million in labor income combined. When specifically looking at the region of Centralia, labor income would be fueled by things such as: ATV maintenance, accommodations, tours, building infrastructure, etc. The East region, where Centralia is located, produced \$165 million in total sales from all sources combined. This region alone created 2,400 jobs in 2010. (See Appendix 4 for details) There are direct effects tied to State Parks such as: lodging, restaurants, amusements, retail stores, and transportation sectors. These goods and services coincide with State Parks to allow a better experience for the visitor. In addition there are secondary effects to the initiation of State Parks. The multiplier effect is what leads to these secondary effects. The concept of a multiplier is that an initial amount of spending (in this case by state park visitors) leads to added spending and results in an economic contribution greater than the initial amount. These secondary effects are a part of broader set of industries like: utilities, banking, and retail trade. No matter the tourism path Centralia takes, there can be massive economic impacts that will revitalize Mt. Carmel and communities of the like. Local parks, open space, and trails provide close to home recreation that fuels the economy.

Implementation

After communicating with AAOA grant writer Kathy Jeremiah, she conveyed to us the general timeline of initiating projects of this nature would be around 1 year to establish the “master plan” of the initiative. After that, the actual implementation (depending on size of volunteer base and resources) would take anywhere from 2-5 years. This of course is subject to change or shift with the given circumstances of the initiative, but can be used as a “general” gauge of standard expectations. After networking with all the different stakeholders that we have come into contact with, we highly suggest that collective strategizing continue to take place with the different stakeholders in this document that we have contacted in the “Networks & Contacts List” below. Suggested next steps would be to comprise a proposal for the recommended initiative above with the signatures/backing of the stakeholders below. Everyone on this List has been contacted and have expressed interest in the initiatives described in this paper.

Networks & Contacts List:

<<redacted>>

Appendix

Appendix 1

CONTACT US

Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission Contact Form

Please provide your contact information

Prefix *

First Name *

Last Name *

Address *

Street Address

City State / Province / Region

Postal / Zip Code Country

Email *

MAILING ADDRESS

Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission

State Museum Building
300 North Street
Harrisburg, PA 17120
Phone: (717) 787-3362

Executive Offices are located in the State Museum Building. See contact information above.

EMAIL CONTACTS

For questions/comments in the following areas please contact the following

Above is a standard form for initiating contact with the “Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.”

Appendix 2



CONTACT

First Name

Last Name

Email (required)

Phone

Similarly, above is the standard initiation form for proceeding in communication with the organization “Heritage PA”

Appendix 3

Table A: 2014 Heritage-Defined Visitor Economic Impact of 5 Study Heritage Areas

| 2014 Spending Impact of Non-Local or Overnight Visitors | | | | | |
|---|-----------------|-----------------|---------------|-----------|---------------------|
| | Heritage Areas | | | | |
| | Allegheny Ridge | Lincoln Highway | National Road | Route 6 | Susquehanna Gateway |
| Visitors (# of Party days/nights) | 344,903 | 1,034,486 | 626,045 | 4,336,559 | 209,535 |
| Heritage Visitor Spending (000's) | \$65,606 | 258,873 | 151,750 | 1,056,641 | 62,251 |
| Direct Effect | | | | | |
| Jobs | 564 | 2,603 | 1,667 | 9,641 | 568 |
| Labor Income (000's) | \$14,164 | \$53,628 | \$30,318 | \$216,916 | \$12,117 |
| Value Added (GDP) (000's) | \$19,534 | \$82,316 | \$48,862 | \$318,603 | \$195,01 |
| Output (000's) | \$33,386 | \$147,854 | \$90,403 | \$558,669 | \$34,326 |
| Total Effect | | | | | |
| Jobs | 699 | 3,260 | 2,050 | 12,271 | 735 |
| Labor Income (000's) | \$20,914 | \$78,396 | \$45,873 | \$316,157 | \$19,152 |
| Value Added (GDP) (000's) | \$31,137 | \$126,814 | \$75,890 | \$499,413 | \$32,470 |
| Output (000's) | \$52,300 | \$225,530 | \$137,340 | \$891,101 | \$56,282 |

Note: Party days/nights accounts for all visitors within a group and the time they spend in an area. Source: Survey of visitors to 5 study heritage areas, 2014; 3,524 total respondents.

Above is a table showing the economic impact of five selected Pennsylvania Heritage Areas separated in direct and total effect. Also shows the total number of visitors and visitor spending.

Table B: 2014 Heritage-Defined Visitor Economic Impact of all 12 Pennsylvania Heritage Areas

| Statewide Model - Visitor Spending Impact/Non-Residents | All 12 Heritage Areas Pennsylvania |
|---|------------------------------------|
| Visitors (Party days/nights) | 7,539,755 |
| Heritage Visitor Spending (000's) | \$2,089,077 |
| Direct Effect | |
| Jobs | 19,333 |
| Labor Income (000's) | \$477,881 |
| Value Added (GDP) (000's) | \$709,062 |
| Output (000's) | \$1,208,247 |
| Total Effect | |
| Jobs | 25,708 |
| Labor Income (000's) | \$798,114 |
| Value Added (GDP) (000's) | \$1,263,295 |
| Output (000's) | \$2,147,091 |

Source: Survey data of visitors to 5 study heritage areas, 2014; 3,524 total respondents, extrapolated using visitation data from the remaining 7 non-study heritage areas.

Above is a table showing the economic impact of all twelve Heritage Areas in Pennsylvania in both direct and total effects. Also shows the total number of visitors and visitor spending.

The economic impact of Pa Heritage Sites: Full Report

http://www.rural.palegislature.us/documents/reports/PA_Heritage_Tourism_2016.pdf

Appendix 4

Table 1: Pennsylvania State Parks Economic Significance Data Comparisons 2008, 2009 (estimated), and 2010*

| Input Data | 2008 | 2009** | 2010 |
|--|---------------|---------------|----------------|
| Official Park Attendance | 34,112,309 | 38,687,616 | 38,364,432 |
| Calendar Year General Funds | \$60,950 | \$54,756 | \$52,276**** |
| Total Statewide Economic Significance*** | | | |
| Sales | \$818,309 | \$928,072 | \$1,145,721 |
| Jobs | 10,551 | 11,966 | 12,630 |
| Labor Income (in \$000's) | \$291,440 | \$330,532 | \$397,763 |
| Value Added | \$464,730 | \$527,062 | \$648,991 |
| Cost to Benefit Ratio | \$1 to \$7.62 | \$1 to \$9.63 | \$1 to \$12.41 |

* Monetary figures are in millions (000) except for the cost benefit ratio

** 2009 projections/estimates based on the same ratios from 2008 data, but using the increased visitation numbers from 2009

*** Figures based on total economic significance (all State Park visitors with indirect/multiplier effects included)

**** 2010 general fund budget includes augmentations from gas operations funds

The table above shows the total economic significance of Pennsylvania State Parks across three years; 2008, 2009, and 2010.

Direct effects are \$227.2 million in wage/salary income and 9,435 jobs. The \$628.6 million in direct sales generates another \$517 million in secondary sales for a total sales impact of \$1.145 billion. An additional 3,195 jobs and \$170.6 million in wages/salaries are supported through secondary effects as the visitor spending circulates within Pennsylvania's economy (Table 5).

Table 5. 2010 Statewide Economic Significance of Visitor Spending

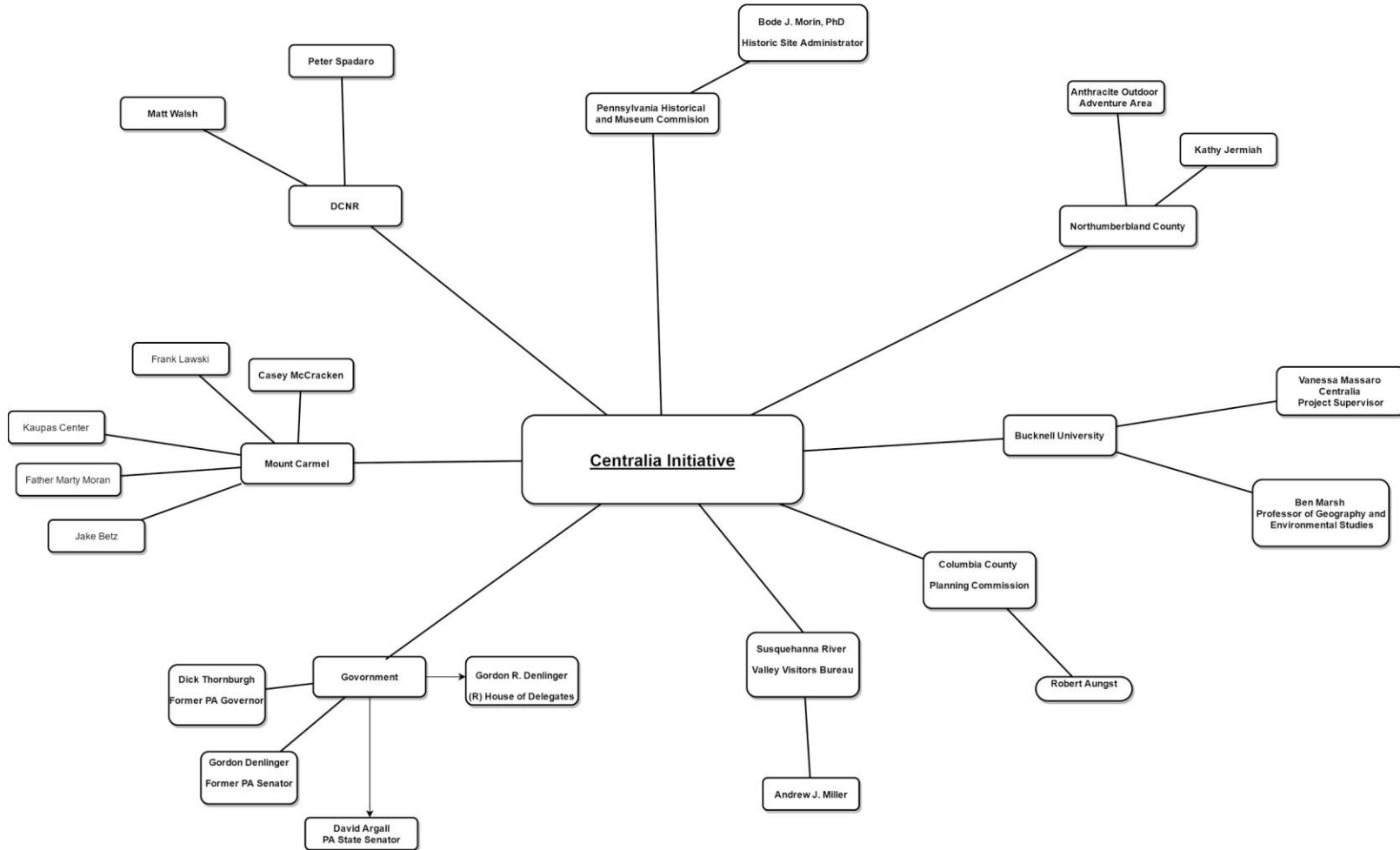
| Sector/Spending category | Sales \$000's | Jobs | Labor Income \$000's | Value Added \$000's |
|-----------------------------|------------------|---------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| Direct Effects | | | | |
| Motel, hotel cabin or B&B | 33,547 | 345 | 10,434 | 18,601 |
| Camping fees | 9,238 | 107 | 4,561 | 4,849 |
| Restaurants & bars | 243,441 | 4,366 | 88,435 | 124,585 |
| Amusements | 54,775 | 999 | 21,538 | 32,947 |
| Marina | 2,294 | 30 | 1,272 | 1,535 |
| Grocery stores | 33,649 | 624 | 17,368 | 28,167 |
| Gas stations | 48,641 | 780 | 24,736 | 40,500 |
| Other retail | 72,443 | 1,528 | 37,361 | 60,818 |
| Wholesale trade | 50,126 | 550 | 15,171 | 34,595 |
| Local Production | <u>80,508</u> | <u>104</u> | <u>6,301</u> | <u>13,966</u> |
| Total Direct Effects | 628,661 | 9,435 | 227,177 | 360,562 |
| Secondary effects | <u>517,059</u> | <u>3,195</u> | <u>170,586</u> | <u>288,428</u> |
| Total Effects | 1,145,721 | 12,630 | 397,763 | 648,991 |

This table above shows the direct and secondary effects of visitor spending in Pennsylvania State Parks according to Sales, Jobs, Labor Income, and Value Added.

Economic Impact of Pa State Parks: [Full Report](#)

http://dcnr.state.pa.us/cs/groups/public/documents/document/dcnr_007019.pdf

Appendix 5



Above is a graphical representation of the network system established by our team for this project, we hope this will serve as a visual motivator that there are indeed stakeholders and frameworks already in place for collaboration, and that others can be added to it.