

Geotourism: The Tourism of Geology and Landscape

16

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Design and setting by P.K. McBride

16 USA scenic byways – connecting people to places

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Scenic byways in America: a national collection

International tourists who are seeking America’s most scenic roads and geotourists who are searching for America’s most significant geological sites can both find reliable guidance in America’s Scenic Byways program. This program presents to travelers 151 scenic roadways and the landscapes that surround them. These national scenic roadways were first nominated by local community groups, then officially designated by commissions in each of the 50 states, and finally presented for national recognition and branded as America’s Byways®. Now 18 years after the program began, these 151 acclaimed highways have produced increased tourism and economic development for the regions that they pass through. Each has written guidelines for continuing local management and each has provided interpretive materials that assist the traveling public (e.g. Figure 16.1). All are a source of considerable regional pride.



Figure 16.1: Lake Lenore caves signage.

Program history and goals

The program was established in December 1991 when the United States Congress created a new program for designating National Scenic Byways within the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act. This program was continued within the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century in 1998 and in the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, and Efficient Transportation Equity Act of 2003. The goals of the National Scenic Byways Program were to provide a high quality visitor experience, to strengthen local economies, and to develop ways to manage the irreplaceable assets of the corridor.

An annual discretionary grant program established by Congress supports both state and nationally designated byways. In 2008 over \$US38 million was available for grant projects. The grant program is administered by the Federal Highway Administration, and funds are passed through the State Transportation Departments to local byway organizations. Since the program's inception in 1992, \$US346,999,974 has been awarded to 2672 projects in 52 states and territories. Eligibility categories include state and Native American scenic byways programs, corridor management plans, safety improvements, facilities such as pullouts and overlooks, access to recreation, resource protection, educational information and marketing programs.

Table 16.1: The six intrinsic qualities of scenic byways (Mingo, 1997)

Scenic: Beauty, both natural and human made. The qualities of the features are measured by how memorable, distinctive, uninterrupted, and unified they are.

Natural: Minimal human disturbance of geographic and other natural ecological features.

Historic: Landscapes, buildings, structures, or other visual evidence of the past. There must be something tangible and visible— not just the site of something that used to be there.

Cultural: Visual evidence of the unique customs, traditions, folklore, or rituals of a currently existing human group.

Archeological: Visual evidence of the unique customs, traditions, folklore, or rituals of a human group that no longer exists.

Recreational: The road corridor itself is used for recreation like jogging, biking, roadside picnics, or provides direct access to recreational sites like campgrounds, lakes, ski lodges and cabins.

Intrinsic qualities define the byways

For a route to qualify as a National Scenic Byway, a road or highway must possess one or more of the six 'intrinsic qualities' listed in Table 16.1. In this sense, an intrinsic quality refers to a feature considered representative, unique, or irreplaceable – perhaps a geological feature, a canyon, a mountain range, or a Native American trail. These features must possess major local or regional significance and have a community (or group of communities) committed to their management. A formal document called the Corridor Management Plan guides the management process.

Two tiers of national designation

The collection of All-American Roads represents the finest examples of the intrinsic resources of the nation. Designation as an All-American Road is rare; of the 151 National Scenic Byways, only 32 have achieved this highest designation. To receive an All-American Road designation, a road must possess multiple intrinsic qualities that are nationally significant and contain one-of-a-kind features that do not exist elsewhere

Chapter extract

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