Dear Friends,

Last summer we invited you to help us imagine the future of the Atchafalaya National Heritage Area (the heritage area). Many of you participated in one of the eight open houses that were held in different parishes (Concordia, East Baton Rouge, Iberia, Lafayette, St. Landry, St. Martin, St. Mary, and Terrebonne), read the first newsletter, or returned a comment card with your thoughts and suggestions. Hundreds of people expressed very specific ideas and concerns about the heritage area and its future. We thank you for your comments; they will help us develop a management plan that will make a lasting difference in the long-term vision for preservation and management of the heritage area.

In this newsletter, we summarize the many comments that we heard. These comments will be incorporated into the next planning step, which involves developing and then exploring alternative visions for the Atchafalaya National Heritage Area. If you have any comments on the information contained in this newsletter, please contact us. We have a website and email address for your convenience (see following page). This is your heritage area, and your opportunity to be part of creating the vision for its future. Thank you for joining us in this planning effort.

Mitch Landrieu
Lieutenant Governor
Management planning is the broadest level of decision making for national heritage areas. Developing a vision for the heritage area’s future is the primary role of the management plan. The plan will describe the desired resource and visitor experience conditions to be achieved during the next 10-15 years, and guide decisions about management and use of the heritage area. Several possible options or alternatives for the heritage area’s future will be developed and analyzed before a preferred direction is selected.

Please visit the heritage area website http://www.atchafalaya.org/ for more information and to stay up-to-date on the planning process, or visit the National Park Service’s planning website at http://parkplanning.nps.gov/sero (and click on “Atchafalaya National Heritage Area Management Plan”).

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What We Heard from You

The first newsletter, issued in June 2008, described the Atchafalaya National Heritage Area management plan process. More than 2,600 copies of the newsletter were mailed, and another 1,400 were distributed at heritage area visitor centers, at popular heritage area destinations, at heritage area events, and through heritage area partners. The newsletter asked people their opinions on what makes the heritage area special to them, what they enjoy most and least about the heritage area, what they would like to see or not see in the heritage area in the next 10 to 15 years, their suggestions for management, their major concerns for the future of the heritage area, and any other comments they wanted to provide to the management planning team.

The heritage area management planning project team also held public open houses in eight different cities (Baton Rouge, Breaux Bridge, Eunice, Houma, Lafayette, New Iberia, Patterson, and Vidalia) in June 2008 to gather more information from the public. These open houses were attended by local citizens and landowners, representatives of many local and regional jurisdictions, tribal members, resource and regulatory agencies, and other public land managers, organizations, and partners.

The management planning team has benefited from your thoughts about the heritage area. We have learned a great deal and have been challenged and inspired by your thoughtful comments and willingness to share your insights. For your convenience, we have summarized the written and verbal comments into the following three major topics. If you are interested, the full record of comments can be reviewed at the heritage area headquarters and is available online at the NPS planning website http://heritageareaplanning.nps.gov/sero (and click on “Atchafalaya National Heritage Area Management Plan”). This is also where you can find updates on the plan during the next few years.

Public meeting at the Prairie Acadian Cultural Center (Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve)
Special Values and Enjoyment

Most people believe the heritage area is special because of the natural resources or setting, which includes the flora, wildlife, views, natural quiet, and undeveloped areas in and around the heritage area. In addition, respondents said they value the history and the unique cultural resources found in the heritage area — such as the various languages, food, music, stories, and architecture — and they acknowledged a need to preserve and interpret these outstanding resources. They also stated that they value the people within the heritage area.

Many also noted how much they value the visitor and recreational opportunities available in the heritage area. They emphasized their love for and their lifelong experiences fishing, crawfishing, hunting, boating, canoeing, kayaking, and camping in the Atchafalaya Basin. They expressed how much they value the close and easy access to these resources and recreational opportunities.

Many respondents from the Atchafalaya Basin shared their personal connections and their family histories. Many, naturally, stated that they highly value the Atchafalaya Basin and Louisiana history. They take great pride in their state.

Other special values of the heritage area included the following:

- **Quiet** and opportunities for solitude. Visitors value being able to get away from the noise and intrusions of daily life and enjoy being able to slow down and be close to nature. The heritage area provides a place of serenity, peace, and relaxation.
- **The value of the heritage area designation** and what it could mean — improvements in education and interpretation of the history and culture of the Atchafalaya Basin, and increased preservation efforts for its cultural and natural resources.
Concerns and Potential Issues

The most frequently mentioned topic of concern was related to the amount of trash and litter found within the heritage area. The current lack of maintenance and upkeep within the heritage area were often cited as frustrating factors. Many people identified the lack of public and local residents’ understanding of the importance of the unique cultural and natural resources within the heritage area. They recognized a need for educating local residents about their cultural heritage and the benefits of preserving their natural and cultural resources.

Diminished water quality, increased siltation, and the general loss of natural resources were frequently mentioned as problems. Many people felt that intervention by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, oil and gas exploration and drilling, and logging activities have drastically changed the waterways — causing siltation, pollution, an abundance of invasive species, a lack of natural flooding, and poor water quality. They expressed the need to restore the natural waterways and improve the water quality.

The level of development and commercialization of the heritage area was another major concern. People felt that the heritage area provides a refuge from change and development and appreciate the limited presence of commercial development. Some are concerned that future development could diminish open space and that more commercial activities would detract from their experiences.

One of the most frequently mentioned concerns was for the future funding of the heritage area. Concerns included the lack of funding for maintenance, staffing, and special projects. They expressed fear of the enforcement of strict land use policies on sportsmen, the loss of private property rights, and interference from politicians and special interest groups.

Maintaining public access and a variety of recreational opportunities was of interest to many. These opportunities include hunting; recreational and commercial fishing; crawfishing; developing boating, kayaking and canoeing routes; creating trails for walking, hiking, and biking; and establishing areas for camping both on the ground and floating on the water. Respondents also mentioned a desire to provide swamp tours, hold more fairs and festivals, and expand on ecotourism opportunities.
The most frequently mentioned topic was the protection, preservation, and conservation of the heritage area's natural resources and biodiversity. Specifically, respondents mentioned the need to protect the remaining cypress trees, restore the natural waterways and water quality, remove invasive species, and preserve the native plant and animal species.

Respondents would like to see the protection and interpretation of the heritage area's unique cultural resources. Many specifically mentioned preserving the Cajun, Creole, and French languages, as well as the stories that are being lost between generations. They want to share their food, music, and architecture with local youth and visitors.

Some people wanted to see more hiking, biking, and walking trail connections in the heritage area to increase the diversity of recreation and access opportunities. In addition, some asked for new or different opportunities for camping, including on the ground and floating on the water. There were also numerous comments on improving and installing more boat ramps, parking areas, restrooms, museums, and visitor centers. People also expressed an interest in a greater number of interpretive/education programs about the heritage area’s history and cultural and natural resources.

Other topics mentioned included the need to increase funding and not overdevelop or overcommercialize the heritage area, especially as a means to generate revenue. The protection of natural resources should be paramount.

Other respondents included the need to establish long-term heritage area partnerships and stewardship opportunities. Partnership and stewardship opportunities need to support complementary heritage area and partner objectives and facilitate a more holistic mutual concern for, care of, and commitment to heritage area resources. The heritage area also needs to improve coordination with adjacent landowners, local communities, and area agencies to fully protect the heritage area’s resources.

Many noted the need to reach out to local residents to make them aware of and connect them to the heritage area, increasing their knowledge of their ancestors and their cultural heritage as well as their understanding of the importance of protecting and preserving the area’s natural resources and biodiversity. The need to make the heritage area recognizable and clarify its identity as part of the national heritage area system, as well as provide consistency among the regulations of adjacent public lands, was also expressed.

Here’s What Comes Next

Over the next six to nine months, National Park Service and heritage area staff will be defining the issues that the management plan will address and exploring various options/alternatives to resolve them. With that information, preliminary alternatives for long-term management of the heritage area will be developed. Alternatives are different scenarios on how the heritage area could be managed over the next 10 to 15 years. The heritage area will be sharing these preliminary alternatives with the public between winter 2008 and spring 2009 through a newsletter and a series of open houses, where you will have an opportunity to review and help improve the alternatives. With your feedback, the management planning team will then refine and add more detail to these preliminary alternatives and release them for public review in the Management Plan / Environmental Assessment in fall 2009–winter 2010. In spring-summer 2010, the heritage area will publish the “Finding of No Significant Impact” and implement the plan as funding allows.

For more information on the remaining steps required to complete the plan, please see the management planning schedule on the next page. Your involvement is critical to the success of this effort. You will have opportunities to comment and contribute ideas along every step of the way!
# Planning Process for the Atchafalaya National Heritage Area Management Plan

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<tr>
<th>ESTIMATED TIME FRAME</th>
<th>PLANNING ACTIVITY</th>
<th>PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT OPPORTUNITIES</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>SPRING 2008</strong></td>
<td>Project Startup</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>SUMMER-FALL 2008</strong></td>
<td>Scoping — Identify concerns, expectations, and values related to the heritage area with the public, heritage area staff, partners, government agencies, and other stakeholders.</td>
<td>Review newsletter and send us your ideas and concerns using the response form. Attend public meetings and voice your ideas and concerns.</td>
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<td><strong>WINTER 2008-SPRING 2009</strong></td>
<td>Develop and Evaluate Preliminary Alternatives — Outline different possible futures for the heritage area and provide opportunities for review and comment by the public, heritage area partners, government agencies, and other stakeholders.</td>
<td>Review newsletter and send us your ideas and concerns using the response form. Attend public meetings and voice your ideas and concerns.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>FALL 2009-WINTER 2010</strong></td>
<td>Prepare and Distribute the Management Plan / Environmental Assessment — Review and comment by the public, heritage area partners, government agencies, and other stakeholders.</td>
<td>Review the Management Plan / Environmental Assessment and provide comments.</td>
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<td><strong>SPRING-SUMMER 2010</strong></td>
<td>Prepare “Finding of No Significant Impact” and Implement the Approved Plan — Prepare and issue a “Finding of No Significant Impact” and implement plan as funding allows.</td>
<td>Work with the heritage area staff to implement the plan.</td>
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