

The Gullah/Geechee Heritage Corridor was established by Congress in 2006. It's now 2009, and you may be wondering, what's up with that?



Well, as with any large, federally-sponsored project, there's no moving forward until proper procedures have been followed. You know, nomination of commissioners, environmental assessments, preliminary recommendations, management plans, etc.

It's tedious, but it's necessary if an adequate amount of public input is to be obtained. And there is a lot of public to contend with, because a big chunk of the southeastern United States is now considered official Gullah/Geechee country.

When I say big, I mean really, really big, as in 12,000 square miles big. The Gullah/Geechee Heritage Corridor extends along the coast of the Atlantic Ocean from Jacksonville, Florida, up through Georgia and South Carolina, and on to Wilmington, North Carolina.

That's four states -- quadruple the amount of state-level bureaucracy that's usually required to interface with the federal government. So it's bound to be an unwieldy process. As the project moves forward, it may also cause some minor interstate political discomfort. Coming to a consensus on the plan will require cooperation between North Carolina and South Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia, and Georgia and Florida. As if they don't already have enough weirdness amongst them, for example boundary disputes, water rights issues and highly divisive sports rivalries.

Perhaps our common love for Gullah culture, belated in our collective history though it is, will help us all pull together as a team.

The National Park Service wants to make sure the public understands several things: This is not going to be a national park.

There is not going to be much in the way of federal funding.

The funding that does exist -- \$1 million a year -- has been legislated, but not appropriated, and that appropriation can't happen until the management plan is done.

In order for the management plan to get done, they need feedback from the public. So the basic message is that, we, the communities of the Gullah Corridor, have to help them get the management plan done.

The project has eight stages. Right now we are at Stage 2: Identify the Planning Context. This is part of an iterative process in which NPS gathers information from the public, interprets it, and then presents it back to us to make sure they are getting it right.

We really have to keep an eye on them, too. For example, the map they had at a public hearing the other night showed the Harriet Tubman Bridge being near Myrtle Beach. I want to make sure that particular error gets fixed, because that bridge is in Beaufort County and we are darn proud of that feat of engineering. And, of course, we are also proud of Ms. Tubman's role in Lowcountry history.

If you were not able to attend the public hearing, don't fret. The federal government is always happy to accept comments in writing, and they probably prefer it that way. For them it means less transcription work -- and they get to avoid being exposed to extended public comment from emotional people who go off on wild tangents. I am one of those people, so I can come out and say it.

They are asking the public seven questions. You can send your answers by mail to this address:

National Park Service
Denver Service Center - Mary McVeigh, Planning
12795 West Alameda Parkway
PO Box 25287
Denver, CO 80225-9901

Or you can provide comments online at parkplanning.nps.gov/guge.

By the way, guge is not a word; it is the shortened form of Gullah/Geechee that the Park Service uses in its documents. I sincerely hope it does not catch on.

So, these are the questions:

How do you feel about the draft vision and mission statements presented in this newsletter? Do you have additional comments on these statements? (This is actually a trick question, because if you don't have a copy of the newsletter, you can't really provide an educated answer.)

How do you feel about the draft purpose statement for the cultural heritage area presented in this newsletter? Do you have any additional comments on the purpose? (Another trick question.)

What do you think is the most important thing visitors should learn about the cultural heritage corridor? Are there other theme topics you would include besides those listed in this newsletter? Why do you think this category is important? (At least you don't need the newsletter for the first part.)

What are the top three features of the Gullah/Geechee culture that you think must be protected, preserved, or continued? What must remain for future generations? What opportunities or management actions would you like to see explored in the management plan for the cultural heritage corridor?

What are your greatest concerns about the future of the Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor? (Three in a row that don't mention the newsletter!)

The last question isn't really a question, it's just the usual boilerplate request to provide any additional comments you would like to share.

For those without access to the newsletter, here are the vision, mission and purpose: The vision for the Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor is to recognize and sustain an environment that celebrates the legacy and continuing contributions of the Gullah/Geechee people to our American heritage.

The mission of the corridor is to 1) nurture pride and facilitate an understanding and awareness of the significance of the Gullah/Geechee history and culture within the Gullah/Geechee communities; 2) sustain and preserve land, language and cultural assets within the coastal communities of South Carolina, Georgia, North Carolina and Florida; and 3) educate the public on the value and importance of the Gullah/Geechee culture.

The purpose of the corridor is to 1) recognize the important contributions made to American culture and history by African Americans known as the Gullah/Geechee who settled in the coastal counties of South Carolina, Georgia, North Carolina and Florida; 2) assist state and local governments and public and private entities in interpreting the story of the Gullah/Geechee and in preserving Gullah/Geechee folklore, arts, crafts, and music; and 3) assist in identifying and preserving sites, historical data, artifacts and objects associated with the Gullah/Geechee for the benefit and education of the public.

The newsletter also presents these proposed interpretive themes: development of the plantation economy; the quest for freedom; tidal irrigation methods for rice production; the role

of the Gullah/Geechee people in the plantation economy; the task system and how it fostered Gullah/Geechee culture; and the impact of Gullah/Geechee ancestors on the coastal landscape.

Responses are due by the end of June. The Park Service web site says November 1, but that's not correct, according to my sources, who say that deadline is intended for documents that will be posted at later stages of the planning process.

What's next? Newsletter #2. Then a round of public hearings later this winter. Then the draft plan. Then more public comment. ETA for the plan: May 2011. We'll keep you posted.