

Safeguarding Cultural Resources

Bruce Babbitt, Secretary
Department of the Interior

Conservation of natural and cultural resources is an important aspect of the Department of Interior's mission, one shared with the Smithsonian Institution. This, and our custodial responsibility for the National Mall through the National Park Service, have formed the basis of our co-sponsorship of the Folklife Festival for three decades.

Conservation does not mean freezing something in amber or in a museum case, setting aside land or a historically important site to remain untouched and unseen. It means custodial care or stewardship, the prudent use of resources in a sustainable way, so that the bounty we have received can be bequeathed to the next generation, hopefully with value we have added to it. Conservation, in this sense, is serious societal business.

In the last decade we have seen an increasing awareness of the importance of cultural resources in urban renewal, regional tourism, and economic development efforts, and as the basis of conveying the lessons of history to our children and fellow citizens. The Department of Interior and the National Park Service have supported several programs such as the Heritage Corridors and American Heritage Rivers to enable concerned communities to develop cultural resources in a meaningful, sustainable way. These efforts involve partnerships between local, state, and national agencies; the public and private sector; and business, academic, and voluntary

groups. Indeed, the incremental movement toward democracy and citizens' participation observable over the past decade and century informs our work in cultural conservation. Decisions are not made and promulgated from the top down or from centers of power to the peripheries. Instead, we have come to expect local groups to participate more in dialogues about, and take greater responsibility for, the conservation, use, and development of their cultural resources.

We see this movement represented at this year's Festival with programs on New Hampshire, Romania, and South Africa. As illustrated at the Festival, people in New Hampshire have used their ample natural resources for building cultural tourism and recreation industries. They have invested in arts of historic renovation to give character and meaning to villages, towns, and homes. They have inherited attitudes of ingenuity and applied them to contemporary technical manufacturing purposes. And they have taken a tradition of grassroots democracy and turned it into a civics lesson for the modern world.

Romania's participation in the Festival provides a gateway for cultural dialogue, both within that nation and with a broader world. For cultural resources to have value they must be shared or exchanged. Though several Romanian writers and artists achieved international repute over the past decades, cultural creativity and interaction were generally

limited by a repressive regime. With democratic and economic reforms comes a desire by many Romanians to look at their rich cultural traditions — such as those displayed on the National Mall — and devise means for encouraging increased cultural production, creativity, and engagement that contribute to civic life and a prosperous economy.

For South Africa, culture is the lifeblood of the nation. People's culture — expressed in song, dance, plays, murals, posters, arts of adornment, and crafts — provided a vehicle for the anti-apartheid freedom movement that created the new South Africa, and captured the world's imagination. Now, as demonstrated at the Festival, South Africans seek to use a diversity of aesthetic traditions and local, community-based cultural productions for the purposes of economic development and attendant civic participation.

The Festival has long helped people from all regions of the United States and places around the world to define, express, and present their cultural aspirations to a broad public. We have come to see those people as cultural resources in their own right, as repositories of knowledge, skill, artistry, and even wisdom who have the ability to add to and carry their cultural traditions forward to the next generation. And at the Festival they show us how. The Festival is an exercise of cultural democracy in the heart of the free world; we are proud to help in its annual production.