

Our Cultural Heritage: The Key to Preserving America's Treasures

by Bruce Babbitt, Secretary of Interior

Americans have always valued their natural heritage. Our heritage is the gift of our forebears — an inheritance we share with our children and future generations. By preserving and protecting spectacular sites and breathtaking landscapes of natural beauty, we pay tribute to America's past. Millions visit our national parks every year to experience the glorious tapestry of nature in places like Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, and Yosemite. And as we have learned, biological treasures are also to be appreciated in their integrated landscapes — grasslands, wetlands, forests, lakes, and rivers, in which life is continually renewed. At the national, regional, state, and local levels, Americans are caring for and conserving their natural environment — because they are very concerned about open spaces, how we live on the landscape, and how we use its natural resources.

Increasingly, Americans also celebrate their bountiful cultural heritage. The National Park Service has long served as steward for many of the historical sites and monuments that represent and help to interpret the diversity of our national life. We preserve and protect monuments and memorials that help to define our nation's spirit and the principles for which we stand. Our recent initiatives have recognized that cultural sites are part of a larger society, its social movements, and its historical periods. Through federal-state and public-and-private partnerships, we have encouraged the formation of heritage corridors and heritage rivers — the Río Grande among them — to promote the preservation and interpretation of cultural achievements.

Today there is a sense of urgency about protecting America's natural and cultural treasures, simply because we don't always get a second chance. There is a sense of urgency about not just celebrating the visionary acts of great leaders in the first half of the century, but also turning towards the future and asking, "What is that we want to see 50 and 100 years from now? How will we preserve these treasures for the future?"

At the threshold of the new millennium, we, along with the White House and the U.S. Congress, support a program to Save America's Treasures. Some of this effort will help preserve important historical and cultural icons like the Star Spangled Banner and the Wright Brothers Flyer. Other grants have helped to recover Hispanic literary texts in the Southwest, to restore the ferry building at the Statue of Liberty where new immigrants took their first steps into America, and to preserve the Sewall-Belmont House, just a block from the Capitol in Washington, D.C., the first (and present) headquarters of the National Woman's Party, which pressed for women's suffrage.

The Smithsonian Folklife Festival itself is an American treasure. This annual event brings together on the National Mall a great diversity of individuals and traditions, demonstrating that our cultural heritage lives. By honoring past traditions and sharing the inheritance of our culturally diverse heritage with our children and future generations, we move with grace and understanding from one millennium into the next.