

# The Value of Preserving African and Native American Culture

## Summary

History, nature, and preservation sell. That's why tourism is the fastest growing industry worldwide and certain rural areas—primarily those with natural amenities and easy access--among the biggest beneficiaries. Other rural areas, however, are not as fortunate. In *The Value of Preserving African and Native American Culture: A North-Central Mississippi Example*, University of Kentucky doctoral student Alicestyne Turley-Adams examines the potential for and obstacles to the development of cultural-based tourism in some of those less-fortunate areas—rural African American and Native American communities of the South. The report is one of many funded by the TVA Center for Rural Studies at the University of Kentucky focusing on rural development in the region.

Once all but precluded from cashing in on the tourist trade, these African and Native American communities today enjoy brighter prospects (while still facing difficult obstacles). In 1994, Congress directed the Secretary of the Interior to study the heritage of the Lower Mississippi Delta Region and assess the feasibility of designating and developing African and Native American heritage areas, trails, corridors, and centers to interpret resources, stimulate tourism, and enhance economic development. Furthermore, the law (P.L. 103-433) authorizes the Secretary to make grants to states to improve access roads to nationally significant sites identified by the study. These and other actions within the Interior Department, signal something of a shift in its dealings with African and Native American people and communities. More so than in the past, the Department recognizes the importance of minority visitors to National Park Service Sites and of minority contributions to U.S. history and culture. It also recognizes the need to designate more sites commemorating those contributions. The latter is especially important because of the tourism and resulting economic growth such designations promote. In addition to those changes, rising disposable income among African Americans afford them the opportunity to tour more.

Still, obstacles remain. According to Turley-Adams, “Ironically, many of the same racial, political, social, and economic conditions responsible for creating the rich social and cultural history the NPS (National Park Service) is seeking to commemorate in the Lower Mississippi Delta Region, remain the same conditions responsible for inhibiting development.” Furthermore, many African Americans are understandably concerned about how their heritage will be promoted. They fear it will be done for “white economic

gain,” rather than as “a means of making communities whole by recognizing past overlooked contributions of minority groups to a greater American society.” At the same time, according to an NPS report, many white Americans are reluctant to promote African and Native American tourism for fear of opening old wounds and fostering resentment.

Although it remains a sensitive issue, Turley-Adams believes that the potential for developing tourism based on African and Native American culture, combined with the increase in African American tourists, offers the nation “its best opportunity for healing, dialogue, social and economic opportunity.” Indeed, for small, rural, southern communities with limited resources, large unskilled labor pools, and few prospects of attracting major industry, tourism may be one of the best economic development bets.

***For a copy of the report or more information about the TVA Center for Rural Studies, please call (606) 257-1872.***

***For assistance with cultural and heritage based tourism development, try the following Department of Interior programs:***

National Park Service-Cultural Resources Program. Operates a number of programs that provide guidance, information, national coordination, and technical assistance.

Certified Local Governments Program. Promotes historic preservation at the grassroots level through partnerships with state and local governments.

Historic Preservation Fund. Provides matching grants-in-aid to assist in protecting and preserving properties listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Museum Management Program. Provides advice, technical assistance, and professional development pertaining to museum collections.

National Historic Landmarks. Manages the identification, evaluation, and designation of nationally significant historic properties. Also monitors the condition of the properties and provides technical assistance and training to their owners and “friends’ groups.”

National Register of Historic Places. Expands and maintains the official list of the nation’s cultural resources worthy of preservation. Provides materials used to identify and evaluate cultural resources and provides information for use in planning, preservation, education, tourism and research.

Preservation Tax Incentives. Fosters private sector rehabilitation of historic buildings, promotes economic revitalization, and provides an alternative to government ownership and management of historic properties.

National Trust for Historic Preservation. Offers a network of development and preservation professionals to aid in preserving resources and promoting tourism and development.