

Cultural Landscape Management at Buffalo National River

By Ric Alesch

Editor's Note: Boxley Valley in the Buffalo National River is the setting for a "high level meeting" of natural science and cultural history, and the blending of National Park Service objectives with community pride and wishes.

Ric Alesch, an NPS Denver Service Center park planner, sees the Boxley Valley process as a long-term experiment in the creative formulation of the most difficult kind of management plan that faces the Service: "the issue of how to perpetuate the private, agricultural community in harmony with the historic scene, natural resources, and appropriate visitor use."

The pressing problem, according to Alesch, is the disposition of vacant farm buildings that are falling into disrepair. But other sticky issues include the desirability of allowing new houses, grazing, and appropriate commercial activities. Resource management issues include the valley's historic significance, forest encroachment on vacant farmlands, stream-bank erosion, and water quality. Visitor use and development issues include how to enhance the drive-through experience and where to develop trails in the valley. One of the most difficult questions, Alesch said, is what "management agreements" should be used to implement any plan. (He mentioned leasing vs. sellback as an example.)

This is a story that goes beyond the usual focus of Park Science, but because it involves the fruits of scientific research and deals heavily with natural resource management, and because these matter are here considered within the larger framework that so often tends to modify the "pure findings," it was decided to let Alesch tell the story from the point of view of the project manager. It holds lessons for everyone involved in both input and outreach, and it speaks directly to some mandates laid down recently by Director Mott.

The 1975 Master Plan for Buffalo National River (BUFF) designated the Boxley Valley as a "private use" zone, "including some farmlands that may continue in private ownership, subject to scenic controls and necessary rights-of-way for roads and trails as long as water and air pollution are not increased." The master plan does not provide any details on management of the valley, and for various reasons the NPS has acquired fee-simple ownership of most of the valley although many sellers retained "use and occupancy" agreements for up to 25 years.

In 1983, the park and Southwest Regional Office (SWRO) staff identified the need to develop a management strategy for Boxley Valley. The Denver Service Center (DSC) was requested to study Boxley and prepare a management plan. The overall issue is how to perpetuate the private, agricultural community in harmony with the historic scene, natural resources, and appropriate visitor use.

A planning team was organized consisting of myself as project manager, Mike Bureman, cultural resource specialist, DSC; Steve Chaney, resource management specialist trainee, BUFF; Doug Faris, chief of

planning and design, SWRO; Craig Frazier, historical architect, DSC; Alec Gould, BUFF superintendent; Jim Liles, BUFF asst. supt.; John Murphy, landscape architect, DSC; and Laura Soulliere Harrison, architectural historian, SWRO.

A task directive was prepared to identify the product, clarify the issues, identify data needs, develop a schedule, specify public involvement strategies, and clarify responsibilities. Because this project was an unusual planning effort and the first attempt at a cultural landscape report, this was a critical and relatively time-consuming phase.

The next step was to assemble resource data for the area. A historic resource survey was conducted by the cultural resource specialists on the team. This involved several weeks of fieldwork to evaluate the area, which includes over 200 structures. They categorized structures into four levels of significance, and determined that the valley should be nominated to the National Register of Historic Places as a cultural landscape (rural historic district). This effort drew upon a recently completed oral history project for Boxley Valley. Nomination forms have been prepared by DSC, and SWRO will be submitting them to the National Register office in Washington soon.

Other resource information that was developed or assembled includes slopes, characteristic viewpoints, open field visibility, vegetation, geology, floodplains, soils, endangered species and archaeological sites. Data were analyzed on existing landownership, land use, visitor use and development. A series of overlay

maps were produced for these data using a common topographic base map.

Then came the hardest part — using this information to develop a management plan for the valley. Through a series of team workshops, we developed a set of alternatives addressing the issues identified in the task directive. We also brought in several "consultants" for a day or two to work on certain problems. Among these experts was Joe Sax, Professor of Law from the University of Michigan. He provided input on concepts and techniques for preserving communities in national park areas. Bob Flanders of the Center for Ozark Studies at Southwest Missouri State University also provided valuable insights. Another source of information and inspiration was Robert Melnick's earlier work at Boxley and the draft NPS manual on cultural landscapes he was developing at the time.

After much discussion, debate, and several review drafts, DSC printed the *Draft Land Use Plan/Cultural Landscape Report/Environmental Assessment* in September 1984. Four alternatives were presented for guiding management of Boxley Valley. Alternative A, the "no action" concept, would have continued the trend of emphasizing natural resource preservation. Alternative C stressed traditional historic preservation and Alternative D stressed private use. The preferred alternative, B, attempted to balance these objectives while managing change in the valley.

The final plan, completed and approved in April 1985, is now in print and available through the park



Pastor's parsonage (left), the Boxley church (center), and the former Boxley school, now used as a community building, are among the visual rewards of practicing "open field visibility" at Buffalo National River.

and the SWRO in Albuquerque, NM. It proposes a long-time cooperative effort with the Boxley Community, including private efforts to maintain existing houses with some new homes allowed. Haying, grazing, orchards and crops will be permitted with good conservation practices employed. The reestablishment of a community store is proposed and "bed and breakfast" operations are encouraged.

Historic structures will be preserved through traditional use; modifications and new construction will be subject to guidelines included in the plan. Most fields will be kept open through the agricultural uses described above. A forested buffer zone will be maintained along the river to preserve riverbanks and protect water quality. Measures will be taken to eliminate or reduce livestock access to the river. Information waysides, scenic pullouts and trails will be developed to provide for compatible visitor use.

The Park Service will develop "management agreements" with individuals to encourage continued private use and cultural resource preservation, including land exchanges, resales, and lease agreements under the National Historic Preservation Act. Funding for implementation will come primarily from private sources, along with some NPS operating funds and lease revenue.

One of the keys to the Boxley Valley plan's success is that it is a comprehensive document prepared by a multi-disciplinary team including DSC, park and regional office personnel. The critical cultural, natural, and visitor use issues were dealt with concurrently and solutions negotiated to make it work. Some of the issues continue to be controversial and the plan is not without imperfections; but, most people within and outside the Park Service have claimed it is a good document.

A major key to the study's success is the public involvement effort. The team had informal meetings with valley residents at the issue identification and alternatives evaluation stage. A public meeting was also held on the draft plan. Various members of the team spent considerable time talking to residents individually. Other members of the park staff also have

been working on improving the once-sour relationship between NPS and the Boxley community. In addition, the team worked with staff from the state historic preservation office and Advisory Council on Historic Preservation during the course of the project.

Much remains to be done over the next five to ten years. This includes negotiations with existing land-

owners, appraisals, deed documents, farm management plans, archaeological surveys, lease agreements, and monitoring. A good direction has been established; a lot of follow-up work will be needed in the years ahead.

The Boxley study has shown that through a comprehensive effort, with appropriate data, the right team, extensive public involvement and a commitment by management to follow through, a major cultural landscape can be preserved for the benefit and enjoyment of future generations. DSC is currently beginning a smaller scale effort to develop a similar plan for a more modest cultural landscape in the Erbie area at Buffalo National River.

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Two haying machines on adjacent farms within the boundaries of Buffalo National River continue to operate under the Boxley Valley plan.