

CHAPTER 8
ATTRACTIONS
STRATEGY

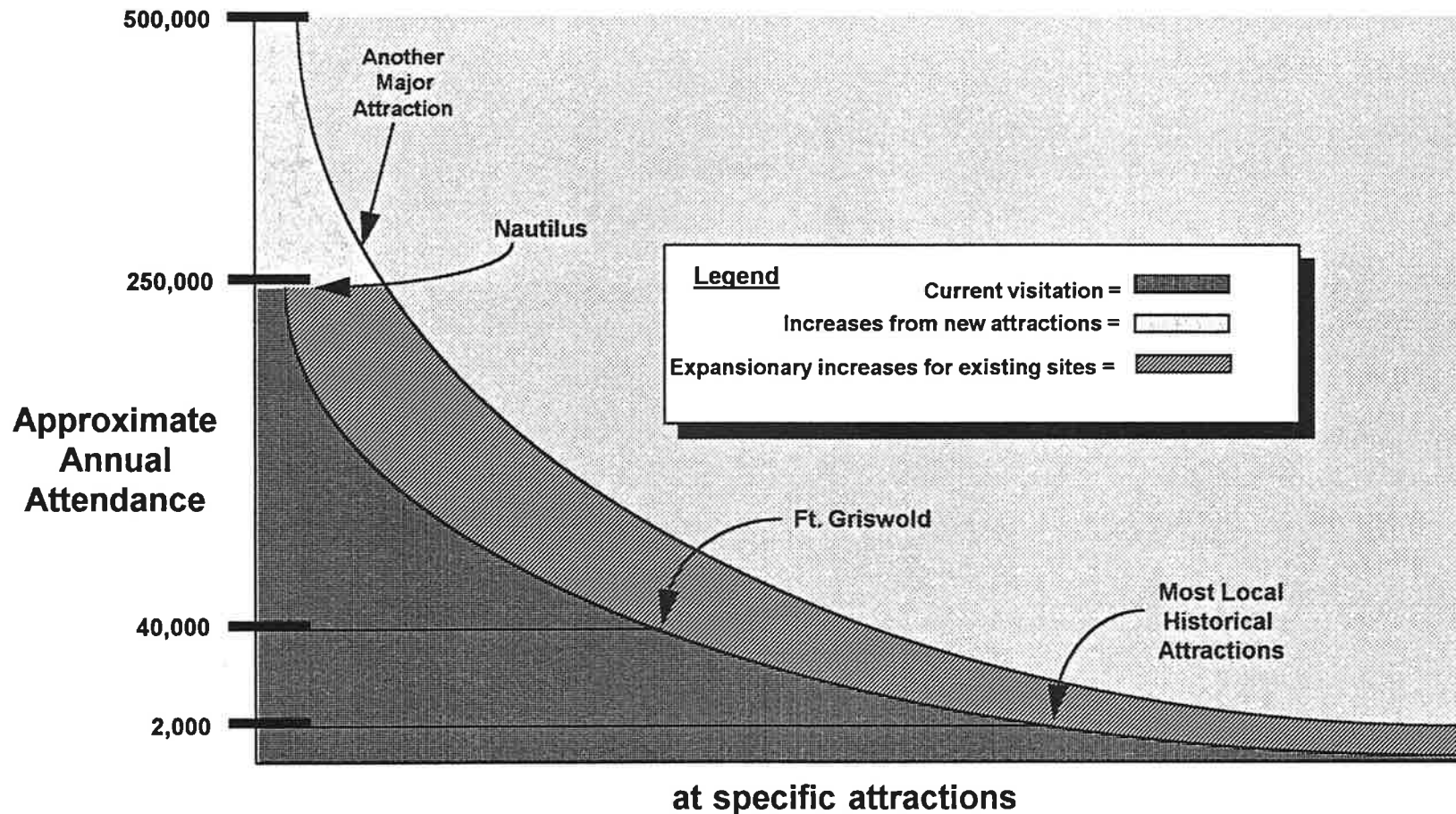
Chapter Review

A major objective of the Heritage Park Implementation Plan was to assess the "critical mass of attraction" that would be necessary to draw a substantial number of additional visitors to the region. In this chapter, we address a variety of issues relating to the development of attractions as a function of expanding visitor draw.

Our strategy begins with an overview of the impact that a new major attraction would have on the overall area visitation. We then assess the current attractions environment and point to several opportunities currently available for attractions development in the region. The options for attractions development that we explore include: expansion of one or more existing area attractions; development of one or more new attractions; enlargement of current plans for the Park's proposed Visitor Center; and a transformation of the Park to a larger national attraction. We evaluate the overall near and long term feasibility of a variety of attractions development ideas. The chapter concludes with the identification of the most likely option for major attraction development: Creating the basis for designating the region a "National Heritage Area".

Impact Goal of Overall Attractions Strategy

Expanding the mass of attraction (say, with a new major attraction), will generate an overall increase in visitation, as well as an incremental increase throughout the local attractions system.



Current Attractions Environment

The current attractions environment in the immediate region of the heritage park site is distinguished by the following characteristics:

Size of Attractions. The USS Nautilus Submarine Force Library and Museum by the Submarine Base is the largest attraction among the heritage park's designated sites, with an annual visitation of approximately 275,000 (attendance at Ocean Beach may be greater, but visitation there is strictly seasonal and solely recreational). With Fort Griswold the next-in-size attraction (approximately 40,000 annual visitation), the mass of attraction in the Heritage Park designated sites drops off dramatically. The balance of the area's heritage attractions have annual attendance levels of approximately 2,500 or less.

Lack of an anchor attraction. Even though southeastern Connecticut is home to many of Connecticut's best attended attractions (Mystic Seaport, Mystic Marinelife Aquarium, Foxwoods Casino in Ledyard, etc.), there is no clear and identifiable relationship of the current Heritage Park sites to those attractions.

While the Nautilus has, by far, the largest visitation of the heritage park's designated historical attractions, its impact on the other heritage park sites is small. The Nautilus is a remote attraction (relative to downtown New London and Groton bank near Thames Street). Other than pedestrian visits from people visiting or stationed at the sub base, most visitors access the site by automobile. Also, the memorial is a discrete, "in/out" attraction: it is neither a hub of localized activity in the immediate (walkable) vicinity; nor is it an obvious attractor for the area's other historic sites. Thus, while the Nautilus is a major attraction in its own right, it is not the "anchor" major attraction that the heritage park needs to have a dramatic impact on the overall visitation for the Heritage Park.

Current Attractions Environment (continued)

Collaborations. Even though the area's heritage and cultural attractions meet from time to time, and participate in assorted community festivals and celebrations, they do not have an extensive history of collaboration. In part, this condition is due to limited resources, rather than lack of desire. Nonetheless, without a formalized collaborative mechanism to bring these groups together, the attractions have no unified voice or direction, and cannot develop cohesive programming or marketing opportunities collectively.

Lack of National Park Service Presence. There is a clear and obvious benefit to the involvement of the National Park Service in a heritage community (note our references to lessons learned in Lowell, Boston, and Salem, Massachusetts). Given the rich history of the region, and the large federal presence that already exists in the Groton/New London area (Sub Base, NUWC, Coast Guard, etc.) the lack of an NPS site becomes even more apparent.

Potential Opportunities

There are several circumstances present or emerging in the region that indicate opportunities for attraction development:

Master plans are currently being drafted by major organizations such as the Mystic attractions, Nautilus Memorial, Project Oceanology, the Coast Guard Academy and the Garde Arts Center. These efforts within the community of larger organizations in the region are likely to result in a stronger and more stable base of larger attractions.

With the acquisition of the Copp Estate on Thames Street in Groton, the well-established state-wide Antiquarian & Landmarks Society is now present on both sides of the Thames River. Although its holdings are not likely to become anchor attractions, the organizational stability of the A&LS could help improve the overall strength of the infrastructure for historical organizations in the region, especially if its properties in the area become sufficiently endowed.

Collaborations are starting to appear between and among the arts and cultural and historic organizations of the region. Meetings are taking place, and some programs have emerged. Perhaps these seminal efforts will grow into strong and ongoing programming opportunities.

Major Attraction Development: Categories of Options

Our objective was to identify opportunities to develop a major attraction associated with the heritage park that would draw approximately 250,000 visitors annually (this would match the approximate annual visitation of the Nautilus Memorial). As shown on the following pages, the options for major attractions development fall into four categories of alternatives:

Existing Site(s) Expanded. In this option, one of the existing organizations/sites in the region could be expanded in such a way as to become the anchor attraction for the Heritage Park.

New Attractions. Under this option, one or more *new* attractions could be developed.

Visitor Center Development. The current configuration of the Heritage Park Visitor Center is not likely to draw the 250,000 attendance benchmark that would characterize "critical mass". However, an expansion of the attraction component of the Visitor Center might very well create such a level of visitation (see below).

National Heritage Area Strategy (National Park Service Designation). The federal government, through the National Park Service, has proposed new resources to support heritage areas throughout the nation. The designation of the Thames Maritime Heritage Park as a "National Heritage Area" would add significant attraction development resources to the region.

Overall Feasibility for Selected Attractions Options

Based on our observations in the project area, our field research in other heritage communities, our professional judgment, and interviews that were conducted with attractions and others, we selected the following options and evaluated their overall feasibility.

The primary criteria for determining "overall feasibility" were availability of resources and capacity to complete the project successfully.

Selected Option	Category (see previous page)	Overall Feasibility	
		<u>Near Term (0-5 years)</u>	<u>Long Term (6-10 years)</u>
Visitor Center "With Sizzle"	Visitor Center Development	High	High
National Heritage Area Designation	Federal Involvement	Moderate	High
Nautilus Memorial expansion	Existing	Moderate	Moderate
Visitor Center "Plus"	Visitor Center Development	Low	Moderate
New Coast Guard museum	Existing	Low	Moderate
Fort Griswold attraction build-out	Existing	Low	Moderate
New London Historical Society Attraction	Existing	Low	Moderate
Build out of area historic districts	Existing	Low	Moderate
Enlarge the designated sites to make the "heritage park" as a whole the major attraction	Existing	Low	Moderate

Overall Feasibility for Selected Attractions Options (continued)

Selected Option	Category (see page 8-6)	Overall Feasibility	
		Near Term (0-5 years)	Long Term (6-10 years)
Fort Trumbull Development	New	Low	Moderate
OceanQuest (formerly Ocean World)	New	(feasibility currently being studied)	
IMAX/OMNIMAX	New	Low	Low
A Navy sponsored "new" attraction	New	Low	Moderate
Waterfront development/Tall Ship	New	Moderate	Moderate
Totally new themed attraction	New	Low	Low
Satellite attraction for other major attractions	New	Low	Low

Short Term Attractions Development Strategy: Visitor Center "with Sizzle"

The best available attractions development option for the Thames Maritime Heritage Park in the immediate future is to build on what is already in place, namely, the development of the visitor center . Neither the heritage park itself, nor any of the smaller historical sites of which it is comprised are likely to become major attractions for the region without substantial additional human and financial resources and community participation. As previously discussed, a "visitor center with sizzle" is recommended to create a good starting base of attractions development. More attractions mass can be added to the visitor center if and when funds become available, and at such time as cultural, business and civic leaders evidence broad-based local support. In the meantime, the visitor center as planned will attract new visitors, keep them in the community, and provide expanded visibility and visitation to other area sites

Preferred Long term Attraction Development Option: National Heritage Area Strategy

The emerging field of "heritage areas" has not gone unnoticed by the National Park Service (NPS), which itself has been conserving, preserving and interpreting historic sites and cultural resources for many years.

Heritage areas distinguish themselves by:

- ◆ encompassing multiple sites with common or related interpreted themes;
- ◆ a blending of the many disciplines relating to cultural conservation,
- ◆ a joining together of disparate professional interests and community objectives: historic preservation and conservation, economic development, education, recreation and tourism; and
- ◆ a strong orientation to partnership management and governance, by which local and state public and private interests work in collaboration with the NPS to bring all elements of the heritage area into a cohesive community development focus.

The heritage areas movement received specific attention during the 1991 NPS 75th anniversary year. An outcome of this focus is proposed federal legislation that would provide substantial funding over the next two decades for a selected number of heritage areas to be designated throughout the country. The proposed legislation has attracted many advocates, and has spawned the creation of a coalition of interested parties under the leadership of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

The proposed legislation calls for substantial funds, annually and over a multi-year period to support the management, operations, and interpretive elements of a heritage area. Thus, the opportunity to be a designated NPS Heritage Area would provide substantial attractions development resources to the Thames Maritime Heritage Park.

Conclusion

Over the course of this study, the consultants have observed a number of potential emerging opportunities for attractions development in the region. While all such possibilities should be monitored on a regular basis, the following maritime-related attractions should be given careful attention as they proceed along their respective implementation paths:

- OceanQuest (Ocean World) Feasibility**
- Nautilus Memorial Expansion**
- Coast Guard Academy Master Plan**
- Availability and Build out of Fort Trumbull**

We do believe, however, that a larger and better opportunity lies in the creation of a National Heritage Area, which would bring the resources of the Federal government to bear on the area. The heritage park should start with its current plans for a visitor center with an exciting and vibrant interpretive component. Efforts should begin immediately, however, to pursue the designation of a National Heritage Area. If the designation effort does not succeed, the park will still be able to stand strong on a quality foundation, namely the visitor center attraction.