

Interview with Mr. Aaron Mahr, superintendent of the National Park Service's (NPS) National Trails, U.S.A

Route 66

1. Please introduce yourself, your role, your organization and the historic route you are presenting.



My name is Aaron Mahr and I'm the superintendent of the National Park Service's (NPS) National Trails office in Santa Fe, New Mexico in the U.S. My office administers nine of the National Historic Trails established under the National Trails System Act. Those trails commemorate various significant movements of people over the American landscape, and include the Oregon, California, Mormon Pioneer, Pony Express, Santa Fe, Trail of Tears, Old Spanish, El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro, and El Camino Real de los Tejas national historic trails. Our office also administers the Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program, which I'll be discussing at the meeting in Sofia.

2) Route 66 is known by everyone. What makes it so special in your opinion? What's so fascinating about it?

Route 66 has both national and international cachet. The brand is instantly recognized around the globe. It's really amazing to travel to far flung places around the world and encounter Route 66 references. It has an identity and characteristics of freedom, mobility, and western exploration in the 20th century that have universal appeal. There are many reasons for that but likely the most important are the way the arts—cinema, literature, and music—have spread the images and stories of the road. Whether it's classic literature such as Steinbeck's the Grapes of Wrath, classic cinema and television shows, or Nat King Cole crooning, the messages of adventure and aspirations found along the road have readily been absorbed worldwide and are nostalgically sought after today.



3) What is legendary Route 66 like today?



The road experience is diverse. Route 66 is a living commercial, social, and cultural transport corridor that reflects 21st-century cultural norms and change in the landscape. Although decommissioned as a federal highway in 1985, most components of the road can still

Ahead, and this group is actively engaging with state tourism offices to increase interstate collaboration and raise awareness of the potential for increased tourism on Route 66.

7) What are the biggest challenges faced in the development of the route as a tourism product?



There are many but it all starts with increased collaboration to tap into the potential of Route 66 in the heritage tourism market. Getting communities and regions to work together to raise public awareness of this resource, and getting tourism offices to work together for shared goals, are key. A challenge faced by Route 66 and probably by all other historic routes is the sheer scale of the route

geographically. Route 66 crosses thousands of miles with so many different jurisdictions. Getting people to travel the entire route is another challenge. We've encouraged development of travel itineraries that not only take people over the entire route, but also in defined areas, such as by state, or even by topical targets such as hotels of Route 66, bridges and pubs.

Another major challenge that is becoming a bigger concern as we see more people travelling the road is the capacity of those areas to meet the needs of busloads of people. We see some iconic, vital places along the road attracting the majority of people and they're reaching or exceeding their carrying capacity. And yet we see other sites, which may have significant iconic stature but aren't developed for tourism traffic, struggling to survive. This disparity is sometimes hard to explain, but could be addressed by greater collaboration between communities, as well as promotions to spread the attractiveness of the road around. As you would expect we also see seasonality challenges. Visitation drops in the cold months and for many businesses getting through those cycles is tough. Sustaining visitation year-round is a challenge.

8) In light of the previous question, does it offer many opportunities in terms of tourism development?

There is tremendous untapped potential on Route 66. In the program we administer, we are working with different partners to develop travel itineraries that focus on specific interests on the road; we focus on states or unique businesses. We're also supporting studies that help us identify how to meet the needs of the unique businesses along the road, what their challenges are and what resources exist to help us meet them?

9) How is the development and management of Route 66 handled?



The road was decommissioned in 1985 and almost immediately advocacy groups began mobilizing to support tourism and commemoration activities. Since those days, the persistent theme in management, development, and promotion of the road has been to protect its unique, idiosyncratic nature. We heard that clearly in the 1990s, when we were asked to do public engagement to identify how the NPS could be involved in commemorating the road, and it's consistently been identified in all subsequent legislation directing our actions. The federal touch is limited and rests on technical assistance to local business owners, governments,

etc. People don't want uniformity on the road — that would destroy it. We avoid standardization, of planning for sites, segments of the road, and stories along it. The local diversity and idiosyncratic nature of the road is what needs to be preserved and protected. Local interests need to be paramount in the development, protection, and management of the road.

10) Could you give us some examples of previous initiatives conducted by NPS to preserve the cultural heritage of the route?

The NPS has been involved with Route 66 preservation since we began scoping for the current programme in the 1990s. After the US Congress created the Corridor Preservation Program, we developed several strategic goals that we've been working towards over the last 20 years. Resource identification and road surveys are primary activities. We've supported a research collaborative among the affected states to help research centers define their archival and data sources. Supporting non-federal collaboration in the form of the Road Ahead has also been important, and we've worked with a broad range of partners to do this. A cornerstone of our activities is our cost-share granting program, which has provided seed funding to scores of projects along the route over the last two decades.



11) A bill has recently been passed to the Congress to designate Route 66 as a National Historic Trail. Route 66 would be the first highway to get the federal historic trail designation. How important are these types of designation? What do they imply?

An official National Historic Trail designation would commemorate and recognize the route's national significance and value. There is an official logo we would develop specifically for Route 66 that would be seen across the entire road and help people in wayfinding and validating sites as components of the trail. Equally important, the NHT designation and support from the NPS would be perpetual. This status doesn't guarantee funding, but it does guarantee a strong and constant identity and visibility.

12) A variety of non-profit groups were formed to help preserve the historic highway along the years. How important is coordination among the different stakeholders?



There are many volunteer organizations that are primarily state-based, and there are also several international organizations working for the commemoration of, and travel on, the road. Their collaboration with NPS and with their respective state agencies is critical. The Road Ahead organization is our primary partner in helping this to happen. The organization is growing and will take a greater role in this activity after designation occurs. There's a great future for the development of Route 66 as a sustainable tourism resource if we all work together to make it happen.

13) What would your 'ideal' Route 66 look like in 50 years?

Two things immediately come to mind. The first is that we hope to save more historic sites and stretches of road than we lose. That's a pretty standard aspiration among all preservationists, but on Route 66 the visibility of the resources is enhanced. Another vision we have is that each visitor will find their own story on Route 66. The US and the world are diverse, but so are the stories on Route 66. We hope that in the future those untold or little-told or little-remembered stories will help all travelers find relevance in their own histories along the road.

