Louisiana park named World Heritage Site

Poverty Point joins international list of unique locations

BY DANIEL BETHENCOURT
dbethencourt@theadvocate.com

Poverty Point on Sunday became Louisiana’s first World Heritage Site, joining unique locations around the globe that include the Grand Canyon and Great Wall of China, and providing a potential boost in tourism to the northeastern part of the state.

“Poverty Point is truly of international significance, so I’m delighted that it now gets the recognition that it deserves,” said Nancy Hawkins, archaeologist manager for state’s Division of Archaeology, which is in the Department of Recreation and Tourism.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s World Heritage Committee designated the site at its 38th session held this year in Doha, Qatar, from June 15 to June 25.

Most countries only nominate one or two sites each year, and this year, Poverty Point was the United States’ only nomination.

There are now 22 World Heritage Sites in the United States, which span from the Statue of Liberty to Redwoods National Forest and Parks. There are 1,001 in the world, including Machu Picchu and the Pyramids of Giza, according to UNESCO’s website.

Poverty Point State Historic Site, in Pioneer, West Carroll Parish, is a 400-acre complex of carefully engineered mounds and ridges more than 3,000 years old, according to a website for Louisiana State Parks.

>See POVERTY POINT, page 4A

Mound A, or Bird Mound, of Poverty Point State Historic Site is seen in 2012. UNESCO named the 400-acre site in West Carroll Parish, home of the largest known North American society to live without agriculture, as the 22nd World Heritage Site in the U.S. and one of 1,001 worldwide.
The site formed the largest earthworks in North America and took 5 million hours of labor to build, U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La., said Sunday. State officials are hopeful the designation will boost tourism in an area without many other national attractions.

"It's huge," Lt. Gov. Jay Dardenne said Sunday of the designation. "It's going to provide an economic shot in the arm for northeast Louisiana.

Sites across the world are judged on their own merits, but the process was in no way fast or simple. The Division of Archaeology and others have worked toward a nomination in earnest since 2007. The United States created a 14-site short-list of potential nominees for the designation.

From there, the site faced obstacles — U.S. 577 runs through part of the site's concentric earthen rings, which raised concerns for preservation. The U.S. also stopped paying its dues to UNESCO in 2011, and Landrieu helped restore the dues this year so as not to bias a decision.

The state's Division of Archaeology also had to provide more than 1,100 pages of technical documentation to show the site was unique in the world and well-preserved, said Chip McGimsey, state archaeologist. Two staff members worked full-time on that task for three years.

"You don't just do this on a whim," said McGimsey, speaking of the process to get a site nominated. "It's a monumental effort to pull together.

Dardenne said he is hopeful the new designation would boost tourism in the area. Dardenne cited the Chaco Culture National Historical Park in New Mexico, which he said received about 10,000 visitors a year before it became a World Heritage Site, saying it "It's huge." McGimsey said.

Poverty Point is one of the next places from the United States likely to join the World Heritage Site List, but officials will not decide for more than a year, McGimsey said. The last U.S. site to be listed was a region of the Hawaiian Islands.

About 20 sites across the world are up for designation at the annual committee session in Qatar this year, McGimsey said.

Abundant wildlife allowed Native Americans to live among Poverty Point's ridges for about 600 years. The mounds were ceremonial.

Ancient cooking tools are on display Sept. 29, 2010, at Poverty Point State Historic Site near Epps in East Carroll Parish.

There are people around the world who put on their bucket list visiting World Heritage Sites," McGimsey said. Roughly 2,000 Native Americans lived among the site's mounds and ridges for about 600 years, thanks to abundant fish and turtles in the bayou as well as deer and squirrels in the land nearby.

For North America, "There's nothing else like it at 3,400 years ago," Hawkins said. Archaeologist Diana Greenlee works at the site full time and is verifying a new mound that she discovered earlier this year. People lived among the site's soil ridges, and the mounds were ceremonial.

Provided by the Office of the Lieutenant Governor

Abundant wildlife allowed Native Americans to live among Poverty Point's ridges for about 600 years. The mounds were ceremonial.

The next place from the United States likely to join the World Heritage Site List is a group of Spanish missions in San Antonio that includes the Alamo, but officials will not decide for more than a year, McGimsey said. The last U.S. site to be listed was a region of the Hawaiian Islands.

About 20 sites across the world are up for designation at the annual committee session in Qatar this year, McGimsey said.

Roughly 2,000 Native Americans lived among the site's mounds and ridges for about 600 years, thanks to abundant fish and turtles in the bayou as well as deer and squirrels in the land nearby.

For North America, "There's nothing else like it at 3,400 years ago," Hawkins said. Archaeologist Diana Greenlee works at the site full time and is verifying a new mound that she discovered earlier this year. People lived among the site's soil ridges, and the mounds were ceremonial.

The next place from the United States likely to join the World Heritage Site List is a group of Spanish missions in San Antonio that includes the Alamo, but officials will not decide for more than a year, McGimsey said. The last U.S. site to be listed was a region of the Hawaiian Islands.

About 20 sites across the world are up for designation at the annual committee session in Qatar this year, McGimsey said.