



VIEWS & VISIONS

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What's in a Title? Creating West Virginia's First National Park

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Roger Wilson is a managing partner and Chief Executive Officer of Adventures on the Gorge. While attending college, he worked as a whitewater guide on the New and Gauley Rivers. Wilson earned his bachelor's degree from the West Virginia University Institute of Technology and two master's degrees from Marshall University. A graduate of the Market Base Academy and Six Sigma Six, he has served on the executive boards of the West Virginia Manufacturers Association, West Virginia Whitewater Commission and West Virginia Wildlife Endowment Fund.

Packed with stunning whitewater, world-class rock climbing, beautiful vistas and top-notch trails, the New River Gorge has long been an adventure destination for in-the-know nature lovers and outdoor sports enthusiasts. Now, the majestic region is on the cusp of being discovered by a much broader audience.

The New River Gorge is currently up for a new federal designation which would transition the park from a National River to a National Park and Preserve. With a bill co-sponsored by both of West Virginia's U.S. Senators and gaining bipartisan support in Congress, the hope is that it will pass in late summer or early fall, creating West Virginia's first true National Park. This new designation would put the New River Gorge in an elite group of some of the most cherished natural wonders in the country, alongside parks such as Denali and Yosemite.

Currently, the National Park system encompasses 418 sites, and only 60 of those are designated as National Parks. So, while for many intents and purposes the New River Gorge National Park and Preserve would remain the same as it did as a National River, the new designation would mean an increase in nationwide recognition and, in turn, visitation. For West Virginia and the New River Gorge area, this means more investment in our local community, more tourism revenue and an opportunity for more people to discover our beautiful corner of the country.

Since the New River Gorge Bridge and Route 19 were built in West Virginia in the 1970s, adventure tourism has played a vital role in the state's economy. While the former coal towns within the gorge regressed and began to go back



to the hills, the town of Fayetteville began to come alive with a new purpose – to share the natural wonders that the region has been blessed with.

Adventure tourism companies began to spring up in the region to facilitate introducing more people to the mountains, rivers and rocks of the gorge. As a Fayette County native, I watched the region transition and was privileged to get to be a part of the rise of the adventure tourism industry. At first, the outdoor adventure industry in the state was comprised of a group of wild young folks pushing the limits of adventure. Today, the industry has become inclusive of all types of adventurers.

Not only does adventure tourism create a way to share the stunning natural attractions with visitors from outside of the region, but it also plays an integral role in the local economy and community.

Created from the merger of pioneers of the region's whitewater rafting industry, Adventures on the Gorge was itself a pioneer of the adventure resort model. Now, the burgeoning adventure resort not only offers whitewater rafting on the New and Gauley rivers, but it is also a base for exploring the region's vast array of outdoor adventures such as ziplining, aerial challenge courses, hiking, road biking, rock climbing,

stand up paddle boarding and mountain biking. Plus, visitors can find anything from luxury lodging and fine dining to rustic camping and live music, creating a personally customized vacation experience to allow for everything from relaxing and enjoying nature to adrenaline-filled excursions.

Not only does adventure tourism create a way to share the stunning natural attractions with visitors from outside of the region, but it also plays an integral role in the local economy and community. Fayetteville, with a population of less than 3,000 people, is home to more than 20 area restaurants, many of which are eclectic establishments supported by the seasonal stream of tourists. The outdoor adventure companies not only employ seasonal employees but also year-round locals. For example, Adventures on the Gorge employs a year-round staff of 40 to 50 people, while during the spring, summers and fall it provides around 500 jobs. By providing jobs for people who would likely otherwise be forced to leave the region in search of work, adventure tourism helps to create a vibrant community.

If the New River Gorge is secured as a National Park, these numbers will continue to expand. Throughout the history of the National Park system, other natural wonders that have been converted into National Parks have seen around a 20 percent increase in visitation. This transition will not happen overnight, but as visitation starts to increase, the community will grow to support it. We have treasures here that no one else has, and the beauty of outdoor adventure tourism is being able to share our natural resources and our love for our environment. Someone else can build the biggest roller coaster or the longest zipline, but no one can build the New River Gorge. 

