



VIEWS & VISIONS

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Investing in West Virginia's State Parks and Forests

Sam England, Chief
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Sam England is Chief of the West Virginia State Parks and Recreation Section of the Division of Natural Resources, a role that is the culmination of more than 40 years of service to the state's parks system.

England's commitment to West Virginia State Parks began with his first job in 1977 on the golf course maintenance crew at Twin Falls State Park in Wyoming County. He continued with the state parks through high school and college. The day after earning his undergraduate degree, he was hired as a naturalist at North Bend State Park in Ritchie County.

England has served as Park Superintendent at Moncove Lake State Park in Monroe County, Greenbrier State Forest in Greenbrier County and Stonewall Resort State Park in Lewis County. He has worked on numerous state park projects, including the opening of Stonewall Resort, the lodge at Chief Logan State Park and the system's first electronic reservations systems.

He earned a master's in business administration (MBA) and bachelor's in wildlife biology from West Virginia University. England proudly earned Eagle Scout honors in 1978.

West Virginia State Parks' longtime Chief, Kermit McKeever, coined the phrase "Where People and Nature Meet." That phrase remains in use today when describing the importance of state parks and their contribution to connecting people to the outdoors. Early visionaries nationwide recognized the need for a state parks system to set aside unique and special places to augment the growing interest in national parks. Today, state parks thrive across the United States, recognizing nearly three times the visitation of the national parks system. The primary mission of state parks is to provide public recreation, often in local areas where none would exist otherwise.

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In addition to the benefits offered to the citizens, the West Virginia State Parks and Recreation Section's mission of preserving and protecting the state's greatest treasures cannot be overlooked and is even more important now than when it was established. These protected lands are significant for providing specific necessary ecosystems that are not safeguarded elsewhere in the state. The upper watersheds of many of the state's rivers and streams are within the agency's responsibility, helping to ensure healthy water



supplies for the citizens within and outside of our borders. Hiking trails and park and forest roads meander quietly through areas, providing tranquil settings for mental and physical health and for the enrichment of the visitors. These areas are treasured by citizens as important, valuable resources.

Early on, development of state park lands centered mostly on visitor comfort and safety. The first major development occurred with the help of the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s, forming park infrastructure and facilities. However, in West Virginia, our leadership recognized decades ago the importance and economic benefits of state parks and forests and chose to expand them into vacation destinations. Certain areas were chosen for expansive development while others were chosen as day-use facilities, each with its own importance.

Early developments included lodge, cabin and recreational expansions at parks such as Blackwater Falls, Cacapon and Watoga state parks. In the 1960s, economic diversification developments were made at Hawks Nest, Pipestem Resort and Twin Falls Resort state parks. The most recently completed lodge development successes are at Canaan Valley Resort, Chief Logan and Stonewall Resort state parks.

Today, the state's leadership recognizes the need to invest in our state parks and forests. The expectations of the modern traveling public, compared to the developments decades earlier,



Architectural renderings for Cacapon State Park Lodge renovation and addition, Berkeley Springs, West Virginia

and the need to address the mounting deferred maintenance list for a system now nearly a century old, is a growing concern. In 2016, an economic impact study was conducted and determined that West Virginia's state parks and forests' seven million visitors annually spend approximately \$226 million throughout the state during trips to state parks, forests and rail trails operated by the Division of Natural Resources. Approximately 46 percent of this spending was by out-of-state visitors.

State parks' economic impact, which is a measure of fresh money infused into the state's economy, reflects the tourism importance. Our economic impact is between \$160.5 million and \$189.5 million, revealing that for every \$1 of general tax revenue provided to state parks, \$13.15 on average was generated in fresh money that wouldn't be there if not for the operation of state parks and forests. Fresh money includes spending

by those who travel more than 50 miles and from out-of-state visitors.

Through the leadership of Governor Jim Justice and the West Virginia Legislature, the need for investment has been recognized and a pathway to address these needs has been identified. It was no small task and one which most other state parks systems nationwide have not been able to overcome.

Over the next two to three years, West Virginia's state parks will be investing more than \$80 million into addressing these needs. Most significant is the investment at Cacapon Resort State Park Lodge with the addition of 80 lodge rooms, a restaurant, conference facilities, a spa and other amenities. Of additional significance will be the investment of nearly \$20 million for upgrades to existing lodges, cabins and campsites. The remainder will be invested into various facility upgrades, recreation,

safety and deferred maintenance projects throughout the system.

These investments will touch most West Virginians as they see and enjoy improvements within our parks and forests located throughout the state. The improvement projects will be distributed throughout the state to multiple vendors, which should allow the investments to benefit a variety of contractors.

This well-deserved facelift provides the attention and investment needed and is good news, not just for state parks, but for West Virginia. State parks are good for people, good for the environment and good for the economy. That's a winning trifecta. ▽