



VIEW*S* & VISIONS

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West Virginia's Other Natural Resource

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He earned his law degree from the West Virginia University College of Law in 2014. He was president of the Energy Law Society, a member of the Environmental Law Society and the Moot Court, and Chief Justice of the National Energy and Sustainability Moot Court Competition. He was the recipient of several CALI Awards, given to the student with the highest academic standing in each class.

Cottle previously worked with the West Virginia Attorney General's Civil Rights Division and was selected for the Judith A. Herndon Legislative Fellows Program.

We're a natural resource state. Known most prominently for our coal reserves, West Virginia has supplied energy to the nation for years. In the past decade, we've drastically increased natural gas production from our vast shale gas play. We've built our economy and structured many of our laws around these resources in an attempt to harness their wealth. But we tend to forget, or at least overlook, that West Virginia is blessed with another natural resource: tourism. As we move forward, the young leaders of this state must – as we have done in regard to our other natural resources – consider the impact of our laws and policies upon the tourism industry.



A BASE jumper participating in Bridge Day, an annual extreme sports event at the New River Gorge Bridge. Hundreds of BASE jumpers and nearly 80,000 spectators attend the event each year

That begins with recognizing the foundation of our tourism industry. It's one of the best, if not *the* best, viewsheds in the eastern United States. That is how David Hartvigsen, chief executive officer of Adventures on the Gorge, characterized one of my favorite playgrounds in West Virginia: the New River Gorge. The Gorge and surrounding areas in Fayette County are home to multiple, promising outdoor adventure companies, such as Adventures on the Gorge and ACE Adventure Resort. Like the coal companies that used to drive the local economy around the Gorge, these local adventure companies have brought life to the local area by capitalizing on our world-class rivers. In turn, local restaurants are thriving and upstart companies are appearing.

It's no surprise that areas such as the New River Gorge are thriving. An Adventure Tourism Market Study, performed by George Washington University in partnership with the Adventure Travel Trade Association, found that the adventure travel market had accelerated 65 percent in only four years. That trend is expected to increase. Our state should look closely at such statistics to pinpoint the areas in West Virginia that have the resources to meet the outdoor adventure demand.

Recognizing that we have the resources in place to have a successful tourism industry is merely our first step. We must also recognize the challenges facing our tourism industry. Our young generation is acutely aware of the broadband problems that West Virginia faces; but, the state's infrastructure problems are even more basic than that. Some of the regions and



The New River Gorge Bridge, located near Fayetteville, West Virginia, is the world's second longest single arch bridge

areas in which our tourism industry would thrive have limited or no available capacity for basic infrastructure, such as central wastewater treatment. As a result, companies are constrained in their ability for growth. Fortunately, we can solve these problems.

Earlier this decade, the State of West Virginia retained a company to develop a comprehensive plan to guide the investment in, and development of, the state's tourism industry. The plan identified the resources that the state could use to increase tourism, analyzed the difficulties facing the tourism industry and set forth action items that the state should pursue to bolster the tourism industry. For instance, the West Virginia Infrastructure and Jobs Development Council (IJDC) is generally responsible for awarding grants to utility projects such as sewage extension.

The IJDC comprises multiple members, including many government agencies, that either vote in or provide input to the IJDC. The plan recommended that the West Virginia Division of Tourism be added as a full participant to the IJDC. Adding the Division of Tourism would allow the specific needs of tourism to receive full consideration in the planning and implementation of infrastructure development.

That is precisely the type of thinking that our young generation should utilize as we move forward in expanding our economy for years to come. Going beyond utility development, we should consider how all of our laws and policies will affect the state's tourism industry, from environmental and energy laws to social policies. As West Virginians, we

often question what we can do to keep our young people from leaving the state. However, just as important is a related issue: What can we do to get people to come to our state and, perhaps, stay? It's a win-win opportunity. Our resources provide the ability to attract people to our state for recreation and adventure. Tourism also provides jobs, which gives our visitors and our natives a reason to stay. We should harness tourism as a natural resource and treat it just as we have our other natural resources. That begins with understanding our resources and removing barriers to expansion. ♡