

**TESTIMONY OF RICHARD A. JOHNSON
OWNER, RIVER EXPEDITIONS, FAYETTE COUNTY, WEST VIRGINIA**

**BEFORE THE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES**

**FIELD HEARING: "THE NEW RIVER GORGE PARK & PRESERVE"
DESIGNATION ACT
FEBRUARY 22, 2020**

Good Morning - Thank you Senators Capito and Machin and the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee for inviting me and holding this hearing in West Virginia. I'm Rick Johnson - my wife and I own River Expeditions located in Fayette County, West Virginia. I am an anomaly in the rafting industry having formerly been a coal operator; managed timber properties; as well as being an avid sportsman. I live and work in West Virginia by choice.

Southern West Virginia since the late 1800's has relied on the coal industry for jobs and economic prosperity. Mines once numbering in the hundreds and employees numbering in the thousands has become only a shadow of its former self now numbering in the single digits and employing in the hundreds. Tourism has become the new economic engine in the area.

We all agree that Southern West Virginia faces difficult challenges: high unemployment from lost coal-related jobs, drug abuse, diminishing population, etc. How can we keep families here in the short term while retaining high school and college graduates for tomorrow's workforce?

We recognize the need for an economic driver that will grow the region's economy, by providing jobs and tax revenue thus stimulating the local and state economies. As you know, the New River Gorge National River has been under the National Park Service umbrella since 1978. This has been a mutually beneficial partnership for Park Staff, Park Users and the area - we are thankful to Congressman Rahall and Senator Byrd who had the foresight to designate three national recreation areas in Southern West Virginia.

Now is the time to expand the realm of one of these national river areas, giving it the designation of a National Park & Preserve. We believe this to be the resource for which economic, historic and environmental sustainability will come together for the greater good of the region, state and nation. It's time for West Virginia to finally have a National Park and be recognized as one of the true gems within the national park system. We would join an elite group of some of the most cherished natural wonders in the country (which number only 62) and take our place alongside parks such as Denali and Yosemite.

Under the new designation, everything will remain the same concerning rules and regulations - it's simply a name change. This is a win-win for everyone. The synergy between National Park Service, the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources and Park Users will remain unchanged.

Research supports the fact that Parks nationwide with far fewer opportunities for recreation report some of the highest visitation, as well as visitor spending and economic output. Can you

imagine what the impact to the New River Gorge National Park & Preserve could yield? The potential is unlimited but sources report an average of 21%¹ increase in visitation alone. Now this is something we can all support.

The most visited park in America is in Appalachia - the Great Smokey Mountains National Park, with over 11 million visitors annually which is double the number of visitors from the next closest park which is the Grand Canyon, one of the modern seven wonders of the world. Just think what a national park designation could do for Southern West Virginia, one of the most economically depressed areas in our country, but within six hours drive of over 42 million people.

Tourism is the only resource that has ever existed in Central Appalachia where all the money stays here not going out of state. This vital resource renews itself each day. Packed with world class whitewater rafting, rock climbing, mountain biking, hiking trails and beautiful vistas, the New River Gorge has long been an adventure destination for nature lovers and outdoor sports enthusiasts.

I am a lifelong hunter and member and donor of the National Wild Turkey Federation, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Ducks Unlimited, Safari Club International, National Rifle Association and America Outdoors. I have always been an ethical hunter following and respecting all rules and regulations, never trespassing or violating the rights of land owners. This is why I have always found it odd that folks have a strange attachment to land they have never owned. Generations of people in the area have broken the law trespassing on land that was privately owned by hunting, fishing and camping almost as if it were an entitlement. It was not until the park service purchased this land in the late 1970's that it became legally accessible to everyone. In fact, without this purchase of land by the park service there would be little to no public land to hunt on in this area since most of the large tracts of private land have been leased by private member-only hunting clubs.

There are currently several areas in the New River Gorge National River that are closed to hunting but there may be an additional small area which may be closed in the proposed new Park and Preserve. This area is so small in acreage that it is inconsequential to the tens of thousands of acres that the park service is explicitly leaving open to hunting in perpetuity.

A friend of mine who does not hunt asked me what part of the park he could hike on with his grandkids during hunting season without disturbing hunters and avoiding the danger of being shot. I had never considered this question before and after some thought I told him that while there are over 66,000 acres within the proposed Park and Preserve that allowed hunting, there would be a few thousand acres that weren't open to hunting so people who didn't hunt but liked to enjoy the Park could do so safely and without worry. It then occurred to me how selfish we as hunters are at protecting every acre of hunting land without any consideration for those who don't hunt but are also entitled to enjoy the beauty and resources we take for granted every day. And for this I was almost embarrassed and a little ashamed.

¹ <https://headwaterseconomics.org/public-lands/protected-lands/national-monuments-redesignated-national-parks/>

In closing, I am in support of the Park & Preserve designation and welcome the opportunity for increased visitation and economic development. This new designation will foster good stewardship, ultimately exposing future generations to this region of our country. Thanks again to Senators Manchin and Capito for their vision to create a National Park in West Virginia and for allowing me to testify.