



# New River Gorge National Park and Preserve

Key Findings of the Economic, Fiscal,  
and Social Impacts of the New River  
Gorge National Park and Preserve

**August 2023**

Produced by Jon Stover & Associates

On behalf of the National Parks Conservation Association







📷 Cover Image: Austin O'Conner

**A mecca for adventure seekers, outdoor enthusiasts, and emerging explorers of all ages, New River Gorge National Park and Preserve strengthens the local economy and serves as the backyard for the communities in the region.**

**Carved through the Appalachian Mountains, New River Gorge National Park and Preserve tells the story of one of the world's oldest rivers, shares the coal mining history of its neighbors, and embodies some of the most diverse habitats that have emerged through time.**

Celebrated with world-class whitewater rafting, mountain biking, and rock climbing, thrill seekers flock to New River Gorge National Park and Preserve for adventures that rival the most renowned outdoor recreation experiences in the country. Alongside these thrill seekers, the National Park greets visitors of all levels of familiarity with the outdoors, providing welcoming hikes, beautiful vistas, and accessible itineraries that showcase the best of the New River Gorge National Park and Preserve. Anglers and hunters traverse the New River and its surrounding preserve, an activity shared by generations of local residents and frequent visitors as both a lifestyle and celebration of the local wildlife. Protected federally since 1978 and designated in 2021 as the 63<sup>rd</sup> National Park, New River Gorge holds the title as the country's newest National Park, a distinction reflecting a new era of opportunity for the 70,000 acres that surround the New River, a waterway millions of years old that even predates the Appalachian Mountains.

### About This Report



The National Parks Conservation Association commissioned this impact study of the New River Gorge National Park and Preserve to convey the economic, fiscal, and community benefits of the National Park. This report, produced in 2023 by Jon Stover & Associates, provides an overview of the ways in which the National Park supports the local economy, generates jobs, and contributes to the fiscal tax base. The impacts of New River Gorge National Park and Preserve extend beyond the flow of dollars and, importantly, provide an abundance of activity and scenic landscape for the broader community and the State of West Virginia.



New River Gorge National Park and Preserve is a vital part of the region and state's identity, an amenity for the community, and a driver of the local economy. **Protecting, enhancing, and leveraging the National Park for years to come will continue and grow the positive benefits created by New River Gorge. The following strategic opportunities support a positive future:**



**Leveraging New River Gorge National Park and Preserve to help coal communities have what they need to successfully transition to emerging growth sectors through outdoor recreation**

*Continue partnerships with local economic and community development entities, positioning the region for growth in the outdoor recreation industry.*



**Filling gaps in park resources by leveraging federal funding to improve and preserve New River Gorge National Park and Preserve**

*Addressing deferred maintenance and rehabilitating the park's wastewater system, funded by the Great American Outdoors Act, is an example of how park funding also benefits surrounding communities. Reauthorization of this legislation, leveraging dollars from the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022, and additional federal funding for the National Park Service would provide additional staff and resources to improve the visitor experience, prepare for climate change, preserve cultural resources, and address maintenance projects within the park, such as rebuilding and restoring additional roads, bridges, and trails.*



**Investing in collaborative solutions to improve water quality in the Lower New River**

*Federal and state funding is needed to upgrade inadequate wastewater infrastructure and improve agricultural practices that would provide cleaner water in the New River to sustain its biodiversity and the outdoor recreation economy.*



**Proactively implementing visitor use management planning to meaningfully enhance visitors' experience and protect the park as visitation increases**

*The changing nature of visits and visitors to the park, increasing types of recreation, climate change, extended shoulder seasons and shrinking off-seasons, and the increase in remote work opportunities mean New River Gorge will likely continue to see increasing visitation in the coming years. Equitable and effective visitor use management planning protects natural and cultural resources while also advancing positive visitor experiences.*



**Being at the forefront of data collection and distribution**

*The data landscape is changing with emerging GPS and credit card spending data. Push for opportunities to incorporate this data within the region and connect with economic development entities, businesses, NPS, and more to collaboratively share new and ongoing insights.*



**Recognizing the New River Gorge region as more than a tourism destination, but also as a thriving backyard for residents of West Virginia and nearby states**

*Support local community initiatives that benefit not only the people who visit the area, but those who call this place home, too. Supporting sustainable solutions, such as eliminating single-use plastics, supports the park and a positive community culture for generations to come.*



**Preserving and celebrating the authenticity and uniqueness of the region and its communities**

*Leverage Nature-Based Placemaking and support surrounding communities and their downtown assets, infrastructure, and experiences for residents and visitors alike. Strong relationships between the National Park Service and policymakers in surrounding counties are critical to promote sustainable economic development that embraces the outdoor recreational economy while protecting New River Gorge National Park and Preserve.*



**Bolstering state and regional initiatives and efforts aimed at enhancing and promoting West Virginia's outdoor recreation assets while protecting the natural resources of the park and the region**

*Supporting clean water initiatives and strengthening partnerships with key players including the New River Gorge Regional Development Authority (NRGDA), the State of West Virginia, WVU's Brad and Alys Smith Outdoor Economic Development Collaborative, and more, will allow the region to balance nature and economic development in gateway communities.*





**New River Gorge National Park and Preserve provides more to the region than just outdoor recreation, serving as a driver for the local economy and a bold contributor to the State of West Virginia.**

New River Gorge National Park and Preserve helped generated \$96.1 million to the local economy in 2022. During their trips, National Park visitors spent \$79.3 million in the region, supporting 1,040 jobs at nearby businesses, equating to \$31.0 million in salaries and wages for local employees.

**How New River Gorge National Park and Preserve Impacts the Economy**

\$58.3 Million  
Industry Operations

**Direct Impact**

*When visitors spend money at businesses on activities, food, lodging, and travel, this revenue directly supports business operations, employee wages, and the generation of local and state tax revenue. Beyond revenue, the direct impacts of the National Park include supporting 792 jobs and \$19.6 million in salary and wages.*

\$37.8 Million  
Business-to-Business Expenses and Spending of Wages

**Indirect and Induced Impacts**

*Visitor spending not only impacts the business where the transaction takes place but also impacts supporting industries due to supply chain purchases made by those businesses. These impacts are commonly referred to as indirect impacts. When employees of jobs supported by direct and indirect impacts spend their personal income, salary and wages, they generate induced economic impacts, creating even more business activity and job creation. New River Gorge's indirect and induced impacts equated to 248 jobs and over \$11.4 million of labor income.*

Note: The above findings follow the US Department of Interior and National Park Service Natural Resource Stewardship and Science National Park Visitor Spending Effects methodology and reported figures. Annual visitation figures provided through the National Park Service. Source: National Park Service, IMPLAN (2023)



**36%**

**New River Gorge National Park and Preserve Annual Visitation**

**increase in visitation** to New River Gorge National Park and Preserve between 2017 and 2022, signifying continued curiosity and ongoing economic benefits to the region. As more people come to the National Park, spending volumes increase, and economic impacts continue to grow.







**42%**

of the region's **hospitality industry** is supported by New River Gorge National Park and Preserve.

**16%**

of the area's total **restaurant revenue** is attributable to the National Park's visitors.



New River Gorge National Park and Preserve brings jobs to the broader region, especially impacting the recreation economy ecosystem. In 2022, the top industries by jobs supported by New River Gorge National Park and Preserve include:

**239 Jobs**  
**Restaurants**



From purchasing a cup of coffee to kick off the day to grabbing a quick bite between hikes to kicking back to enjoy a locally brewed beer, New River Gorge visitors help create jobs at local dining establishments.



**261 Jobs**  
**Accommodations**

Overnight national park visitors support 211 jobs within the hotel and motel industry. Between local campground opportunities and growing cabin retreats, an additional 50 jobs are created within the campground and non-hotel accommodation industry sector.

**98 Jobs**

**Recreation and Amusement**



Booking toured excursions, renting equipment, and contracting guided experiences in and around the National Park support the broader outdoor recreation industry and local businesses.



**45 Jobs**

**Hobby and Recreation Retail Stores**

Outdoor enthusiasts shop locally while visiting New River Gorge National Park and Preserve, purchasing equipment and memorabilia to commemorate their visit, supporting nearly 50 jobs at recreationally oriented retailers.

Note: The above employment impacts reflect the total direct, indirect, and induced impacts. Job figures are expressed as full-time equivalent employment and are attributable to the 2022 economic impact of New River Gorge National Park and Preserve. Source: IMPLAN (2023)



## More Than Just Tourism

### Impacts Beyond the Tourism Economy

Although New River Gorge National Park and Preserve’s economic impact is concentrated mainly in tourism-related industries, it supports a wide variety of additional industries. These other impacts are commonly referred to as secondary effects and are attributable to business-to-business transactions and the spending of employee salaries and wages.

#### Indirect and Induced Impacts by Industry (2022)

Industry Sector	Total Revenue
Real Estate	\$2,956,420
Management of Companies and Enterprises	\$2,391,859
Owner-Occupied Dwellings	\$1,811,596
Hospitals	\$1,178,677
Other Food and Drinking Places	\$956,903
Radio and Television Broadcasting	\$861,275
Offices of Physicians	\$707,242
Services to Buildings	\$684,242
Employment Services	\$646,285
Limited-Service Restaurants	\$594,837

Note: Figures reflect indirect and induced impacts.  
Source: IMPLAN (2023)



#### Why This Matters

**This influx of economic activity helps allow for innovation, new business development, and positive change in the region.**



**In 2022, visitor spending attributable to New River Gorge National Park and Preserve generated over \$7.1 million for the state and local municipalities.**

**\$4 Million**  
**in State Tax Revenue,**  
including \$3 million of sales tax and corporate profit, personal income, and other taxes and licenses

**\$3.1 Million**  
**in Local and Regional Tax Revenue,**  
including local sales tax, property tax, and other applicable licensees and fees





**With the National Park designation, New River Gorge National Park and Preserve serves as a major catalyst for local business growth and entrepreneurship – attracting a wide range of visitors spending money yearlong rather than simply during peak season.**

**Local businesses in the New River Gorge region reported that the lengthened season and year-round tourism with the recent National Park designation supported extended operating hours and business growth.**

**Entrepreneurship** is particularly challenging in highly seasonal areas as dramatic ebbs and flows of customer traffic increase operational hurdles for new businesses.

The park's heightened visitation and associated spending directly support the region's entrepreneurship network, providing more business opportunities to residents sharing pride in the surrounding community.

Connecting with regional and state economic development resources, **prospective business owners in the region** can tap into a multitude of opportunities from grants and trainings to network and partnerships through the New River Gorge Regional Development Authority, Appalachian Regional Commission, the State of West Virginia, and more.





While visitors may experience New River Gorge National Park and Preserve for the first time, **generation after generation of West Virginians have known the Gorge as their job site, their playground, an everyday part of their community, and a core aspect of the state's brand and identity.**



**124,700+**

**people live** in the area surrounding New River Gorge National Park and Preserve. This includes the total population of Fayette County, Raleigh County, and Summers County.

Through targeted partnerships, initiatives, and efforts, the New River Gorge Region continues to connect the benefits of New River Gorge National Park and Preserve with local community residents.

#### Community Development

**A Network of gateway communities**, each offering their own distinction and character as the community spine of the region, the nearby towns and cities leverage regional and statewide partnerships to continue to build the resiliency of their local communities.

#### Health and Wellness Opportunities

**Active SWV** provides regional residents and workers with community and corporate wellness programs to improve the health and livability of the local communities. Many of the programs offered through Active SWV leverage the outdoor recreational assets of New River Gorge. Active SWV and the New River Gorge Regional Development Authority (NRGDA) partner on this effort.

#### New Industries for Employment

**Emerging regional outdoor recreation industries** in the area with targeted initiatives by the NRGDA, Beckley Area Foundation, and the Central Appalachian Network attract the outdoor gear industry to continue local job creation, workforce stability, and support a healthy economy.



#### Connecting with West Virginia's Almost Heaven State Marketing Efforts

West Virginia's statewide branding and tourism initiative, Almost Heaven, celebrates the state's robust outdoor recreation opportunities, scenic landscape, and authentic hospitality. New River Gorge National Park and Preserve strongly contributes to the state's destination development. From being one of the most popular spots on the world's first Statewide Waterfall Trail to being part of the state's All Trails partnership, New River Gorge National Park and Preserve enhances the state's brand and contributes to statewide initiatives for bolstering West Virginia.





New River Gorge National Park and Preserve has not only seen an increase in visitation over the years, but also an increase in funding to build the park and the surrounding area's infrastructure and economy. **These investments improve the visitor experience and the local communities' lives by providing clean water, fixing old and building new infrastructure, improving visitors' facilities, and developing the local economy.**

**Water** Clean water is necessary to keep people and the environment healthy, and West Virginia is highly susceptible to flash floods and storm damage due to its mountainous landscape. Flooding poses risk of watershed pollution and degradation, making flood prevention and mitigation and public health and environmental issues. In 2022, West Virginia received \$6,313,780 from the USDA for twenty-two West Virginia watersheds and flood protection sites. This funding was designated to improve water infrastructure throughout the state, both by repairing existing and investing in new dam and flood protection structures. This project will help mitigate risk to local populations and improve access to clean, safe water.

West Virginia received \$25 million from the US Department of the Interior to cap 160 oil and gas wells and identify and clean more sites in the state. Abandoned wells pollute both the water and air by releasing methane and contaminating groundwater. These wells create a public health threat, and closures help keep communities safe. The state also received \$140,751,000 from the bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act to reclaim abandoned mines. This project not only creates jobs, but continues to focus on promoting better acid mine drainage to prevent watershed pollution. Both uncapped wells and abandoned mining sites harm the environment through runoff pollution, and this funding will create jobs and promote access to clean, safe water.

**Visitor Experience** Recent funding directly improved the visitor experience in and around New River Gorge National Park and Preserve. Canyon Rim Visitor Center received \$1.8 million to update exhibits and the design. Between its scenic views and informational exhibits, Canyon Rim welcomes visitors as one of the park's primary year-round visitor centers. Maintaining and updating the center is key to educating visitors and providing them with a lookout for the famous gorge and bridge.

Outside of the park's boundaries, NRGDA received \$1.5 million in funding to increase trail connectivity at the park. The trails will connect New River Gorge with Needleseye and Fayetteville Town Park. This funding expands visitors' options when exploring the area and benefits local businesses by drawing visitors into the nearby communities.

**Infrastructure and Maintenance** In 2022, New River Gorge secured funding for its second deferred maintenance project through the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA). The first project in 2021 utilized \$280,000 to rehabilitate thirty historic hearths and picnic shelters, and the most recent project was to remove excess structures and abandoned buildings. As the park becomes more popular, it is invaluable to fund projects such as these to keep the area safe and create space for new structures to be built.

Similarly, \$254.4 million was given to 265 communities for Brownfields clean up as part of BIL, \$378,917 of which was given to Fayette County to clean up polluted and abandoned properties to repurpose them. Brownfields contain hazardous substances and require extensive cleanup before the land can be repurposed, and many are in economically distressed areas. Brownfield cleanup projects promote environmental justice, prevent public health issues, and create jobs.

**Economic Development** NRGDA received \$708,300 from the US Department of Commerce's Economic Development Administration (EDA) to expand its Hive program that provides business advisory and technical assistance services to entrepreneurs and small businesses in West Virginia to help them grow into successful companies. Additionally, NRGDA received \$250,000 from the Appalachian Regional Commission to implement their RIVERS Strategy - Planning for Outdoor Recreation Industry, Vibrant Economies, and Regional Strategy. Both the ARC and EDA funding will contribute to creating jobs and developing the tourist economy in the area surrounding New River Gorge.





0 5 Kilometers  
0 5 Miles

New River Gorge National Park	New River Gorge National Preserve	Unimproved road	Region
Mark of Blue land within the National Park Service when former private ownership, please respect the country's rights.	Ranger station	Camping	The degree of difficulty varies from easy to hard and with water level. River users should consult with an experienced local hiker or ranger before attempting river tubing.
Public river access	Primitive campsite	Lodging	



This report was made possible from the support and insight from organizations and agencies in and around the New River Gorge region. We appreciate your time, knowledge and stories that brought this report to life. Special thanks to the staff and leadership at New River Gorge National Park and Preserve, New River Gorge Regional Development Authority, West Virginia Department of Tourism, West Virginia University Brad and Alys Smith Outdoor Economic Development Collaborative, and the gateway communities that make this park a special place.







*Preserving Our Past. Protecting Our Future.*

NPCA is a national, nonpartisan nonprofit organization with 1.6 million members and supporters across the country, including over 7,800 in West Virginia. For decades we've worked at the community level in West Virginia to protect and enhance the state's incredible national parks, from Harpers Ferry National Historical Park to New River Gorge National Park and Preserve.



## CONTACT

**Samantha Nygaard**

*West Virginia Program Manager*

304.989.5310

snygaard@npca.org