NATIONAL PARK SERVICE • U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Foundation Document Overview

New River Gorge National River

West Virginia

Contact Information

For more information about the *New River Gorge National River Foundation Document,* contact: neri_superintendent@nps.gov or (304) 465-0508 or write to:
Superintendent, New River Gorge National River, P.O. Box 246, 104 Main Street, Glen Jean, WV 25846

Purpose

The purpose of New River Gorge National River is to conserve and interpret the outstanding natural, scenic, and cultural resources in and around the New River Gorge and to preserve this portion of the New River in West Virginia as a free-flowing stream for the recreation and enjoyment of present and future generations.

Significance

Significance statements express why New River Gorge National River resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- Flowing water is the definitive creative force shaping the geologic features of the New River Gorge. The New River, one of the oldest rivers on the continent, continues to sculpt the longest and deepest river gorge in the Appalachian Mountains.
- The waters of the New River system contain a mosaic of hydrologic features and aquatic habitats, support a unique aquatic ecosystem, and nourish a riparian zone that supports rare plants, animals, and communities.
- New River Gorge National River lies at the core of a globally significant forest, contains the most diverse flora of any river gorge in central and southern Appalachia, and provides essential habitat for endangered mammals and rare birds and amphibians.
- New River Gorge National River contains a large, outstanding, and representative group of historic places that testify to the experiences of the diverse people who settled and developed this part of Appalachia from the late 18th through the mid-20th centuries.
- New River Gorge National River has diverse and extraordinary scenic resources and views accessible to visitors from the river, rocky overlooks, trails, and rural roads throughout the park.
- New River Gorge National River provides visitors with exceptional whitewater rafting, mountain biking, rock climbing, and hiking opportunities that allow for visitor exploration, adventure, discovery, and solitude in one of the most spectacular river gorges in the eastern United States.

Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- **Geological Processes and Features**
- **Hydrological Resources**
- **Ecological Resources**
- **Historical and Archeological Resources**
- **Scenic Resources**
- **Visitor Opportunities**

Interpretive Themes

Interpretive themes are often described as the key stories or concepts that visitors should understand after visiting a park—they define the most important ideas or concepts communicated to visitors about a park unit. Themes are derived from—and should reflect—park purpose, significance, resources, and values. The set of interpretive themes is complete when it provides the structure necessary for park staff to develop opportunities for visitors to explore and relate to all of the park significances and fundamental resources and values.

- The ancient New River and its tributaries, together with the forces of geological processes, continue to sculpt the gorge, shape the landscape of its watershed, and reveal a sequence of rock layers that serve as windows into time.
- Through time, the New River, and the deep gorge through which it flows, has been a barrier to travel and communication, a corridor for navigation, migration, and industrialization, a source of economic diversity, and a refuge for both people and wildlife.
- With its mosaic of varied and unbroken habitats, and the quality of its air, water, and night sky, the lands and waters in and around the New River Gorge are a sanctuary for a remarkable array of native plants and animals; the refugia this area provides will become increasingly important as the climate continues to change.
- The people of the New River Gorge region developed a culture of working hard and making the most of whatever the land had to offer, whether it was the riches of coal and lumber, the agricultural bounty from rich bottomland, or simply food and game from the forest.
- What was once a challenging wilderness where natural resources were removed and used for economic growth is now restored and protected as a national park to be enjoyed and preserved for future generations.

Description

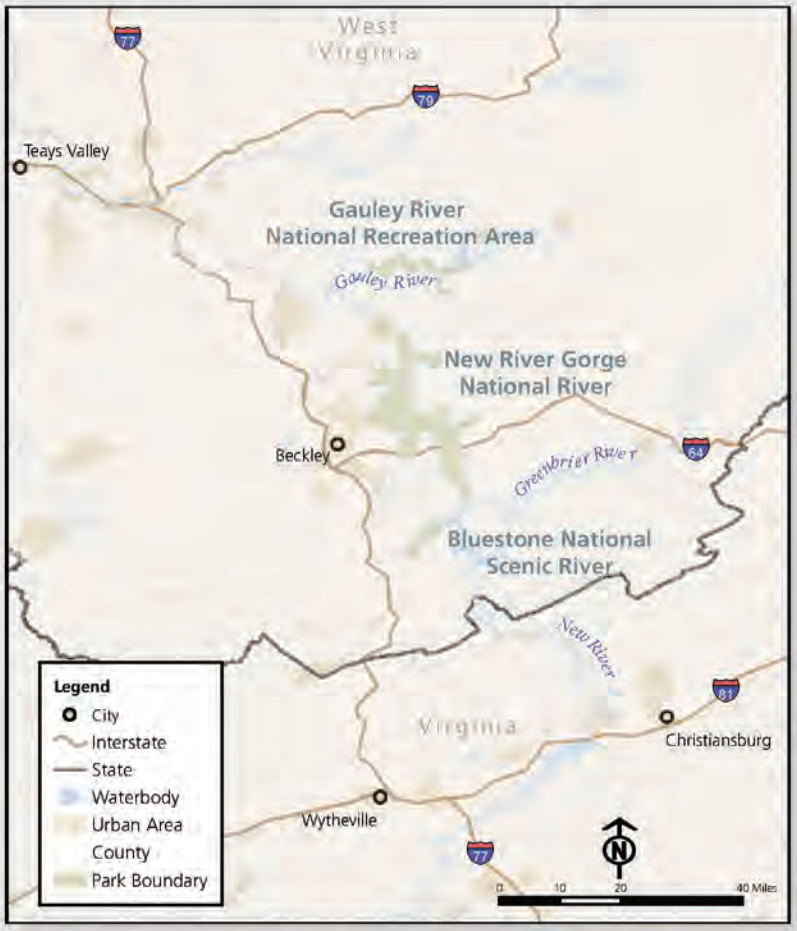
New River Gorge National River was established in 1978 as a unit of the national park system following a 20-year grassroots effort organized by local community leaders. Contrary to its name, the New River is among the oldest rivers on the continent and flows northward, cutting through the Valley and Ridge province of the Appalachian Mountains and then cutting a deep gorge in the Appalachian Plateau. The New River Gorge National River lies at the heart of a protected network of natural, cultural, scenic, and recreational resources that epitomizes the rugged grandeur and heritage of the Appalachian Mountains in southern West Virginia. Natural processes, natural beauty, and geologic history combine at the park to create a spectacular opportunity for the people of the United States and the world to understand and enjoy the country's most dramatic Appalachian Mountain river gorge.

The park is an oasis of wildness in the eastern United States and is a model for other places recovering from past industrial uses. The New River runs free-flowing for 53 miles through the park, changing from a river coursing gently through a wide valley to a wild river pounding through the lower New River Gorge, carved more than 1,000 feet into the rocks of the Appalachian Plateau. The waters of the New River and its tributaries support a highly productive aquatic ecosystem. Within the gorge the largely unbroken expanse of forest supports diverse plants and wildlife native to the river gorges of the Appalachians. Rimrock areas, cliffs, dark forest seeps, and riverside flatrock areas support rare ecological communities. Abundant and diverse breeding bird populations flourish in the forest canopy.

Remnants of the park's past—hidden within the forest—tell the stories of former life in the Appalachian Mountains and especially the gorge. Creative partnerships have made it possible to stabilize, rehabilitate, or restore the most significant historic resources. In the gentle terrain of the upper gorge are restored and rehabilitated early European farmsteads. Within the gorge is a wealth of historically significant abandoned places, some in ruins and some stabilized and rehabilitated, where people worked and lived during the late 18th through mid-20th centuries, supplying the coal and lumber that helped fuel U.S. industry.

The park's setting, both dramatic and tranquil, inspires visitors in many ways. From overlooks, trails, and the river there are stunning views of natural lands—rugged forest, deep gorges, the river, mountain streams, and outstanding geologic rock formations. The lack of modern intrusions adds to the park's dramatic scenery.

Visitors to the park enjoy the many high-quality experiences it has to offer including exploring history, river rafting, fishing, hiking, camping, and generally experiencing solitude and connecting with the outdoors. Park facilities and programs reflect a central theme that aids visitors in understanding how the park is organized, the opportunities that are available, and how to travel in the complicated network of local roads and trails in the park's rugged terrain. Visitor facilities support desired experiences and are designed and located with minimal impact on park resources. Interpretive and educational programs increase visitor understanding and appreciation of park resources.



Cover photo © Gary Hartley. Used by permission.