

# HOW TOURISM IS HELPING TO REVIVE WEST VIRGINIA'S COAL-BASED ECONOMY

 Bridget Shirvell  April 10, 2016  0 Comments



Put West Virginia on your list of places to visit. Maybe not this year, maybe not even next year but within the next five years West Virginia will be the new hot destination. The Mountain state is in the throes of a renaissance and a small army of artists, musicians, farmers and outdoor adventure types are working to revive the state's coal based economy.

“We’re so much more than coal or natural gas,” said Joseph Carlucci with the New River Gorge Regional Development Authority in Beckley, WV.

The extraction industry—think coal—carried the West Virginia economy, for better or worse, since it was discovered in the 1700s. In 2010, the coal industry employed 30,000 of the state's residents resulting in \$2 billion in wages and \$3.5 billion economic impact. Coal is what people do – or at least did.

“My dad worked in the mines until he couldn't pass a physical no more, and I always thought I'd do the same,” Michael Estep told The Washington Post in 2014.

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Declining reserves, increased environmental regulations and cheaper alternative energy have slowly been phasing the coal industry out of West Virginia. In 2013, coal exports were down 40 percent a loss of \$2.9 billion in sales. By 2015 the state had **lost more than 10,000 coal-mining jobs** and was the only state to have lost **a significant number of jobs in the past year.**



Photo: Bridget Shirvell

At a crossroads some in the state are betting on tourism. The



state tourism department has a current budget of around \$7 million, a triple increase from last year thanks to the legislature, although it still lags behind the US state average of \$14.9 million. Partly behind the increase was research from Longwoods International, revealing a \$5.1 billion industry in a state of 1.8 million people, of whom 46,000 are dependent on the industry.

It's an understatement to say there's some work to do before the tourism numbers are big enough to help fill the employment and revenue gaps the failing coal extraction industry is leaving behind. Amy Goodwin, who took over the state's tourism in June 2014, is leading that charge, and at the heart of it is rafting in New River Gorge, farm-to-table dining and a growing arts scene.

“For the first time this year, the white water rafting industry is up,” Goodwin said.





Photo: Bridget Shirvell

ACE Adventure Resort, which employs more than 500 people in Fayette County, saw business grow nearly 10 percent in 2015 and is optimistic that the state's efforts will mean more jobs for more people.



Photo: Bridget Shirvell

Goodwin's department is capitalizing on that by building a

larger digital presence to promote the state where the focus is on experiences, not things.



Photo: Bridget Shirvell



Photo: Bridget Shirvell

“This is a cool place to hear great, live music, have a handcrafted meal and shop for local handcrafts,” Adam Harris, executive producer of Mountain Stage Radio Show out of

Charleston, WV, said “People today are looking for a well-rounded experience that they discover themselves. Coming to town to raft is just one part of their trip.”



Photo: Bridget Shirvell

The creative economy from open studio weekends to the small but emerging agritourism is intrinsic to the tourism infrastructure West Virginia is hoping to build.



Photo: Bridget Shirvell

The state has the highest per capita population of farms in the United States, about 21,300 according to the state department of agriculture. Yet, the average net income for farms is only \$2,500.

“We need to provide opportunities to make farming sustainable,” Cindy Martel, marketing specialist for the department of agriculture said. “Agritourism is a way to do

that.”

Demand for local food isn't the hurdle, supply is. The state, according to Martel, consumes more than \$7 billion in food but produces less than \$1 billion. An explosion in the number of greenhouse-like structures that allow for off-season production and winter markets and a focus on attracting young and new farmers is helping to build the industry.

Outdoor adventures, a developing farm-to-table movement, shopping and 26 live music events hosted by Mountain Stage Radio Show alone each year are making West Virginia a dream spot for anyone that loves experiences and the eat, shop local movement.

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