WestVirginiaUniversity
EXTENSION SERVICE

Seven Natural Wonders of West Virginia

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Educational Objectives

1. Identify seven West Virginia natural wonders.
2. Increase knowledge of these natural wonders, their attributes and locations.

"Wild and wonderful" has been used to describe West Virginia since Governor Arch Moore first used it in a speech in 1969. But what makes it wild and wonderful? The rugged and beautiful mountains, rivers and forests. Here are some fun facts about West Virginia:

Dolly Sods. (Photo credit: Valerius Tygart – Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=19657842)

- West Virginia has the highest average altitude of any state east of the Mississippi River.
- Spruce Knob is the highest point in West Virginia at 8,463 feet above sea level.
- 78 percent of West Virginia is covered in forest – the third-most in the country behind Maine and New Hampshire.
- West Virginia is home to 46 named rivers, more than 121 public fishing lakes and more small ponds, tributaries, creeks and waterways.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the definition of wonder is "something or someone that is very surprising, beautiful, amazing, etc." West Virginia is home to many natural wonders unique to the state – do you know what they are?

Activity: Give each participant a pencil and paper. Have them number their paper from 1 to 7. Ask them to write down what they would consider seven natural wonders in West Virginia. Then, discuss their lists and compare it to the list in the lesson.

For added fun, ask everyone to identify how many of these wonders they have visited and share experiences, or give small prizes for those who answered correctly.

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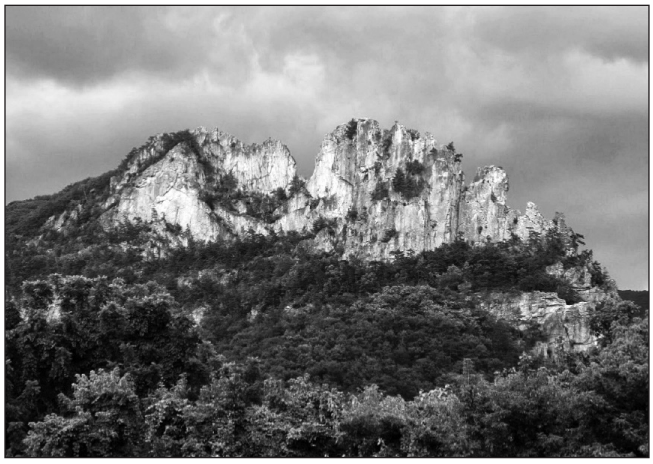

Seneca Rocks. (Photo credit: Mr.Schultz – Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=28528900)

7. Seneca Rocks

As you travel through the northeastern part of West Virginia at the intersection of Route 33 and 55, a spectacular rock formation looking both powerful and delicate with it's almost paper-thin ridge of bare rock towering 900 feet above the North Fork River, suddenly appears. Seneca Rocks is one of the most famous and well photographed natural features in West Virginia. It is visited by hikers, rock climbers and tourists annually. There is a visitor center located at the base of the mountain where visitors can learn how this unusual site was created from an ancient ocean nearly 440 million years ago.

Fun Fact: Evidence suggests Native Americans camped frequently at the foot of the mountain as part of a trade and warpath trail.

6. Ice Mountain

Did you know there was a place in West Virginia where ice forms naturally year-round? In the Eastern Panhandle there is a mountain along the North River that has towers of rocks called Raven Rocks. The Raven Rocks have small caves formed by piles of boulders at the bottom of these towers. In these caves a refrigeration effect occurs where cold-air drafts allow ice to form throughout the year.

This mountain was once home to the small town of North River Mills, which now has no local residents but has been protected as the Ice Mountain Preserve. You can contact the West Virginia Chapter of the Nature Conservancy for guided hiking tours with a strict Leave No Trace Policy enforced.

Fun Fact: For generations, residents of North River Mills would chip ice from Ice Mountain to make ice cream and lemonade in the heat of summer. Although the town no longer exists, there is an annual ice cream festival where these old traditions continue.

Canaan Valley. (Photo credit: Valerius Tygart – Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=41444514)

5. Canaan Valley

Located just south of the small town of Davis, West Virginia along the Blackwater River is Canaan Valley. It possesses the largest wetland area in the Appalachian region and the second largest in the United States, boasting 8,400 acres. Just over a hundred years ago, the valley was home to one of the densest red spruce forests. This high mountain valley, which receives weather patterns from the Great Lakes, such as lake-effect snow, is home to rare and unique plants and animals. One of the most famous residents is the Cheat Mountain Salamander, which is on the National Registry of Endangered Species.

Tourists visit Canaan Valley year-round to hike, bike, fish and play golf in the summer, or ski, snowshoe or ice skate in the winter. The wildlife refuge has a visitor center located off the main

highway. They host guided tours and wildlife sightseeing events. Also located nearby in the town of Harmon, West Virginia is Blackwater State Park.

Fun Fact: In the late 1800s, the density of the virgin red spruce forest in Canaan Valley drew timber companies. Prior to timbering, it was said that the forest was so dense the sun wouldn't reach the ground. Once the trees were felled, the ground was dried from sunlight and struck one of the worst fires in West Virginia history. The valley burned for months.

Sinks of Gandy. (Photo credit: Valerius Tygart – Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=2631545)

4. Sinks of Gandy

South of Canaan Valley, Gandy Creek sinks under the earth into a large cave under Yokum Knob. The sinks form a natural tunnel which drops under the ground on one side of the knob and emerges on the other side of Randolph County Route 40 (Dry Fork Road). The tunnels are about 3,000 feet in length, ranging from 4 to 35 feet high and 40 to 100 feet wide. The creek covers the whole floor in some places but only narrow sections in others. Today, the Sinks of Gandy remain one of the most visited caves in West Virginia.

Fun Fact: The caves were made famous in an article in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1941 by Clay Perry who recounted the story of four cavers who were trapped in the cave for five hours.

3. Dolly Sods

Located east of Canaan Valley and north of Seneca Rocks is the Dolly Sods Wilderness. The 17,371 acre wilderness is part of the National Wilderness Preservation System and covers three West Virginia counties: Grant, Randolph and Tucker. Much like Canaan Valley, the environment in Dolly Sods is more like that found in Canada.

When visiting the sods you'll find a stunningly beautiful but barren landscape of stunted trees, rocky surfaces with windblown boulders, grassy meadows and very old bogs. It is the highest plateau east of the Mississippi River. There are 47 miles of walking and hiking trails.

Fun Fact: Beginning in August of 1943, the military used the area for maneuvers and mountain training for World War II. Many of the artillery and mortar shells shot into the area for practice still exist. When using the trails, you will find signs warning you that live explosives still exist.

New River. (Photo credit: Shawn Ullerup – Own work, CC BY 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=38212638)

2. New River and New River Gorge

The New River is the second oldest river in the world. It is believed that the river rose with the growth of the Appalachian Mountains, long thought to be the oldest mountain range in the world. This ancient river, which starts in North Carolina and flows north to West Virginia,

carved out the spectacular, nearly 1,000-foot New River Gorge in Fayette County.

There are many things to see and do in the New River Gorge area including three visitor centers in the national park, numerous hiking trails, hunting, fishing, boating and outdoor adventure opportunities with local outfitters. This area offers visitors everything from mild to wild.

Fun Fact: On the third Saturday in October every year, Fayette County hosts its annual Bridge Day Festival where they close the 876-foot high, 3,030-foot long bridge spanning the New River Gorge. The bridge is open for the public to walk across and view the spectacular scenery, while building, antenna, span and earthen structure parachute jumpers propel off the bridge.

1. Cranberry Glades

Located in central West Virginia at the headwaters of the Cranberry River in Pocahontas County, the Cranberry Glades is 750 acres of West Virginia's largest natural peat bogs. Glaciers helped form the bogs and some of the plants descended from seeds which took root there 10,000 years ago.

When visiting Cranberry Glades you can make a stop at the Cranberry Mountain Nature Center for in-depth information or a guided tour. This is also the starting point for the Highland Scenic Highway, a high mountain drive with remarkable views and access points to many of the hiking trails. Be careful in wintertime – drive at your own risk!

Fun Fact: These ancient bogs include very rare and unusual plants and animals. Carnivorous plants are among those which can be found growing wild here.

Resources

wvexplorer.com

gotowv.com

http://www.onlyinyourstate.com/west-virginia/wv-natural-wonder/

http://www.wvexp.com/index.php/Category:Natural_Wonders

West Virginia Department of Natural Resources, *www.wvdnr.gov*.

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, *www.fs.usda.gov*.

Nature Conservancy of West Virginia, *www.nature.org/WestVirginia*.

U.S. National Park Service, *www.nps.gov/neri*.

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