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TAKE A HIKE: HOW ONE PLAN MAY THREATEN THE ENVIRONMENTAL STABILITY OF A KENTUCKY GEM

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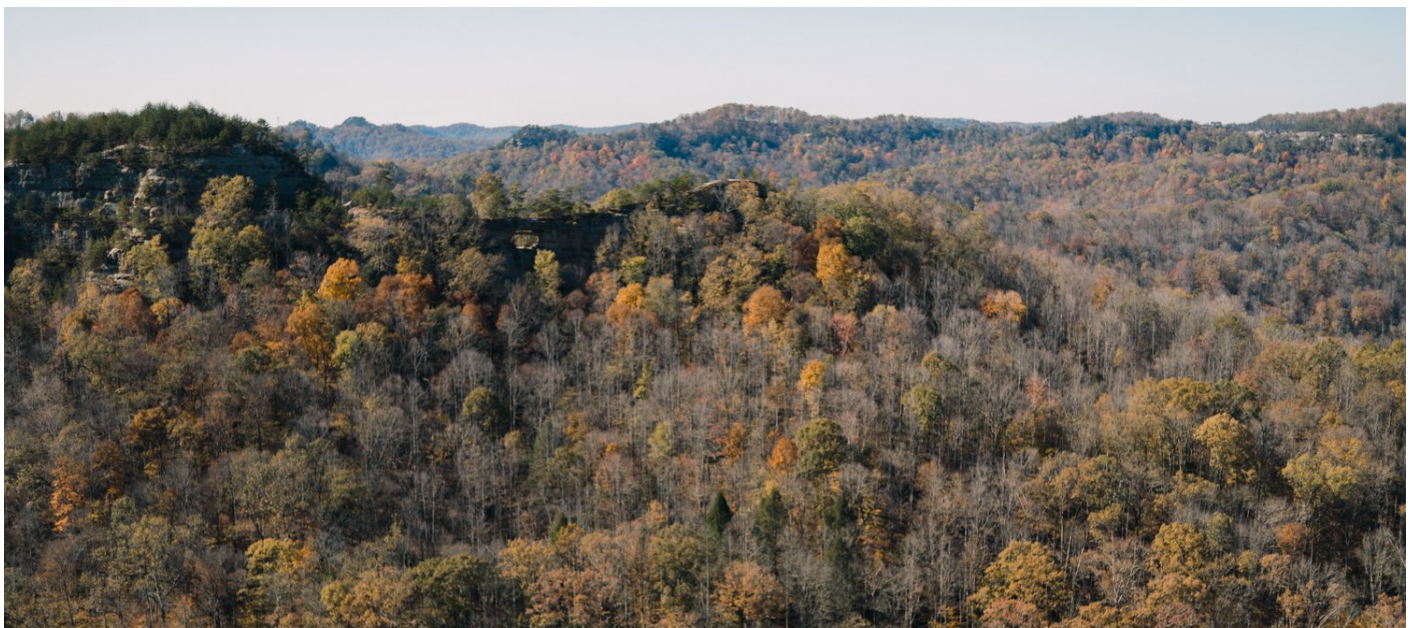
BY: JENNY LOHR

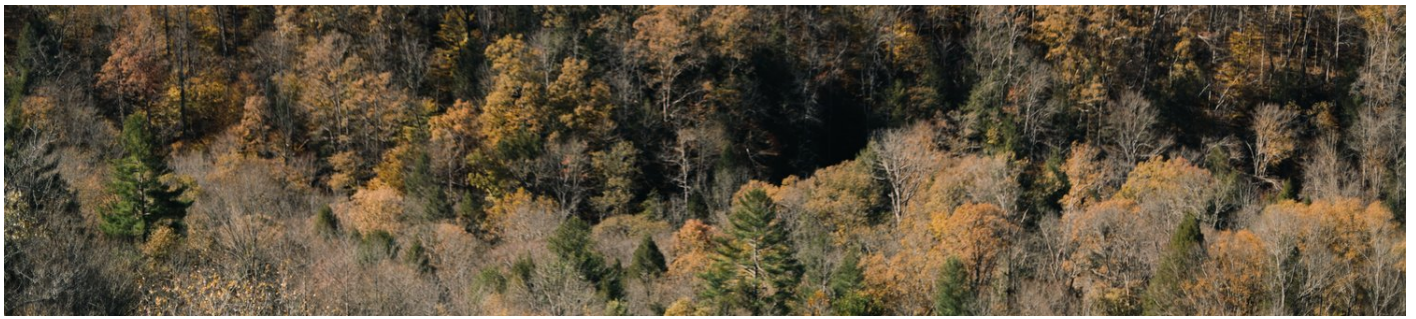
The phrase “take a hike” has begun to take on a whole new meaning. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States, stir-crazy individuals across the country looked towards the outdoors as a solution to their growing cabin fever.[i] National Parks saw a boom in the number of visitors, and many even noted record-breaking visitors as pandemic-related travel restrictions eased up.[ii]

This flood of visitors to the outdoors hit not just the National Parks but also state parks, forests, and natural areas.[iii] Some of the places impacted are the Red River Gorge and Natural Bridge State Resort Park—one of Kentucky’s oldest state parks.[iv] The Gorge sees about a million visitors a year, and COVID-19 has only caused those numbers to increase.[v]

This increase is undoubtedly to continue, as the Red River Economic Development (“RRED”) unveiled a plan to bolster tourism to the area by building a new \$135 million resort hotel.[vi] “RRED is a non-profit arm of the Kentucky Chamber Foundation” and consists of “Kentucky businessmen and local government leaders.”[vii] The master plan was released in September 2020 and was met with both strong support and opposition.[viii]

Projections of this plan include bringing in “more than 500,000 visitors, generating more than \$18 million in wages, and more than \$79 million of local economic impact annually.”[ix] In an area of Kentucky that is experiencing an economic depression, this master plan can seem to some as a saving grace of sorts.[x] “Powell County, where the resort will be, had an unemployment rate of 3.9% in April” of 2021.[xi] By building the resort, the area will see an improvement in infrastructure, as well as bring jobs to residents of Eastern Kentucky.[xii]





However, the arguments for the economic benefits are to be outshined by other, more severe consequences.[xiii] In an area already experiencing an economic depression, the development may eventually price out the current residents and contribute to a phenomenon called “rural gentrification.”[xiv] Residents living in this region of Eastern Kentucky seek to preserve the authentic feel of the area and worry that such an expansion will disturb that and disrupt the lives of those community members.[xv]

The proposed hotel plan also risks seriously hindering the environmental stability of the Red River Gorge while impacting conservation, safety, and overcrowding.[xvi] “Negative impacts from tourism occur when the level of visitor use is greater than the environment’s ability to cope with this use within the acceptable limits of change.”[xvii] Generally, tourism puts enormous stress on natural resources, “local land use, and can lead to soil erosion and increased pollution.”[xviii]

The Gorge may begin to see a “wear and tear” on its natural environment.[xix] As more people flock to the trails of the Gorge, plants and animals that make their homes within the Gorge may start to disappear.[xx] Similarly, the forest’s infrastructure will be hindered with crowded trails and a structure due to not being made for such a vast increase in visitors.[xxi]

As the resort plan unfolds in the Red River Gorge, there will likely be an ongoing debate between bolstering an economy that may need it and maintaining a diverse environmental ecosystem vulnerable to such growth.[xxii]

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[ii] Andy Rose, *National Park Visitors Surge as COVID-19 Pandemic Restrictions Wane*, Cable News Network, <https://www.cnn.com/travel/article/national-park-visitors-surge/index.html> (last updated June 13, 2021) [<https://perma.cc/9JKV-JXGQ>].

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- [v] *Id.*; *Rush of Visitors at Red River Gorge During Pandemic Sparks Call for Changes*, WLKY, <https://www.wlky.com/article/rush-of-visitors-at-red-river-gorge-during-pandemic-sparks-call-for-changes/34623245> (last updated Nov. 9, 2020) [<https://perma.cc/C2B9-4CBS>].
- [vi] Erica Bivens, *Tourism Plan, Including \$135 Million Resort, Released for Red River Gorge*, WTVQ (Oct. 1, 2020), <https://www.wtvq.com/tourism-plan-including-135-million-resort-released-for-red-river-gorge/> [<https://perma.cc/347V-QXTM>].; *Rush of Visitors at Red River Gorge During Pandemic Sparks Call for Changes*,, *supra* note v.
- [vii] *Locals React to Proposal for Big Resort in Red River Gorge*, LEX18 (Oct. 17, 2019, 5:43 AM), <https://www.lex18.com/news/covering-kentucky/locals-react-to-proposal-for-big-resort-in-red-river-gorge> [<https://perma.cc/RT9G-M8TU>].
- [viii] Brandon Roberts, *Proposed Resort at Red River Gorge Moves Forward After Land Purchase, Community Input*, Spectrum News 1 (June 11, 2021 7:45 PM), <https://spectrumnews1.com/ky/louisville/news/2021/06/11/red-river-gorge-resort-moves-forward> [<https://perma.cc/ZR62-JZP5>].
- [ix] *Id.* (<https://spectrumnews1.com/ky/louisville/news/2021/06/11/red-river-gorge-resort-moves-forward>)
- [x] Stu Johnson Kentucky Public Radio, *900-Acre Resort Proposed at Red River Gorge*, 89.3 WFPL (Oct. 18, 2019), <https://wfpl.org/900-acre-resort-proposed-at-red-river-gorge/> [<https://perma.cc/T2FN-8GN7>].
- [xi] Danielle Grady, *Red River Gorge is Already Growing – Will a Luxury Resort Push it Over the Edge?*, Leo Wkly. (June 9, 2021), <https://www.leoweekly.com/2021/06/engorged-red-river-gorge-already-growing-will-luxury-resort-push-edge/> [<https://perma.cc/6FSA-FSSS>].

[xii] *Radio*, (<https://wfpl.org/900-acre-resort-proposed-at-red-river-gorge/>) *supra* note x.; *Locals React to Proposal for Big Resort in Red River Gorge*, *supra* note vii.

[xiii] *Radio*, *supra* note x.; *Locals React to Proposal for Big Resort in Red River Gorge*, *supra* note vii.; #SAVETHERED Campaign Home, Red River Gorge United, <https://rrgunitied.org/savethered/> (<https://rrgunitied.org/savethered/>) (last viewed Oct. 27, 2021) [<https://perma.cc/2DKD-TYVP>].

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[xv] #SAVETHERED Campaign Home, *supra* note xiii

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[xxi] Roberts, (<https://spectrumnews1.com/ky/louisville/news/2021/06/11/red-river-gorge-resort-moves-forward>) *supra* note viii.

[xxii] *Radio*, *supra* note xii; *Locals React to Proposal for Big Resort in Red River Gorge*, *supra* note vii.

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631 SOUTH LIMESTONE, LEXINGTON, KY

40508 (859) 257-4747 [BLOG.KJEANRL@GMAIL.COM](mailto:blog.kjeanrl@gmail.com) ([MAILTO:BLOG.KJEANRL@GMAIL.COM](mailto:blog.kjeanrl@gmail.com))

