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# National Park Idea Has Merit

December 3, 2011

The Intelligencer , The Intelligencer / Wheeling News-Register

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Nature lovers, history buffs and outdoor recreation enthusiasts may well have applauded news of a study to determine whether a new national park should be established in West Virginia's beautiful mountains. The idea is appealing - but the ramifications are mind-boggling.

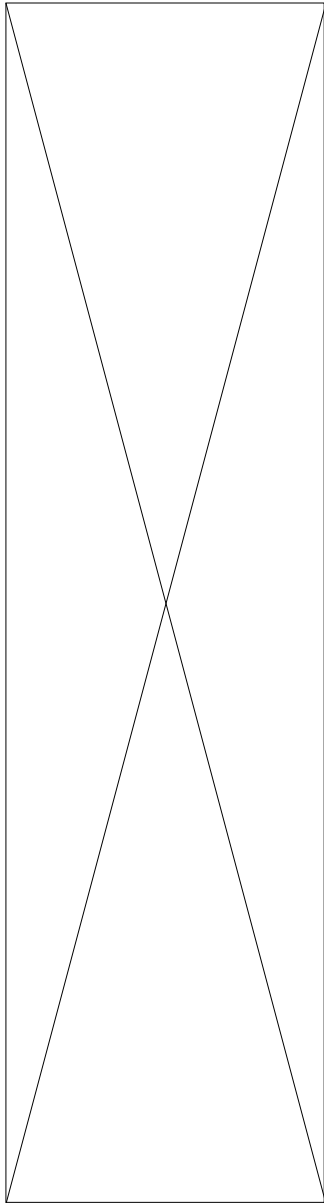
U.S. Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., asked the National Park Service to study the idea. It is to issue a report by September 2012.

There really is no doubt much of the study area is valuable enough to be safeguarded for future generations. Among sites to be considered are Seneca Rocks, Spruce Knob, Dolly Sods, Blackwater Falls, Canaan Valley and the Otter Creek Wilderness. Frankly, several existing national parks lack the appeal of those places.

Certainly more natural areas need to be preserved in the eastern United States. Some existing parks are overcrowded frequently, to the point the park service sometimes uses fees not to raise money but to limit use.

That is not the case in many parks established during the past few decades in western states. But there are reasons the government has been more eager to set aside large tracts of land in the West. First, much of the land already is owned by the government. Second, few uses other than as parks can be found for some areas. And third, population density is low.

For a new national park to be created in West Virginia, many issues



would have to be addressed. They include questions of obtaining land from owners who may not want to sell and prohibiting development in areas that may have rich mineral and/or timber resources.

Then there is the well-being of people who live near national parks. In some areas, such as Great Smoky Mountains National Park in Tennessee and North Carolina, preservation has been an economic development boon. In others, nearby residents insist parks have been bad for their bottom lines.

Learning whether West Virginia's mountains are naturally and historically significant enough to merit national park status is the easy part. Of course they do.

But finding ways to make that happen - including federal funding to establish and maintain a park - is another question. And ensuring a national park would be good for the state's economy is critical, too.

That said, Manchin was right to ask for the park service study.


Once challenges are identified - and they will be, by the dozens - the senator should seek a more in-depth investigation of whether they can be overcome for the good of West Virginians as well as all other Americans.

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