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Local Foods and State Parks Are a Healthy, Wealthy Combination

My grandmother always said, "Health is wealth". No surprise there, healthy bodies lead to a higher standard of living, as well as more career opportunities. Without good health, physical barriers are hard to overcome, and full lives remain out of reach. But I don't think grandma meant wealth was only achieved through physical fitness. Healthy minds are just as important to our happiness, as we look to for a balance between body and soul. Now this may vary from person to person but one way to live a more complete life is to appreciate the little things we often overlook. In such a globalized world, daily habits or familiar experiences can be taken for granted as we forget to connect with local resources in our pursuit of happiness.

A friend of mine recently said for him, good mental health can be achieved by sitting on a river bank at dusk; talk about a tranquil, picturesque scene. I challenge you to heed his advice. Take a moment and admire the old growth forests in our state. Imagine what those old trees have seen and the stories they could tell. You will then notice the small birds that have landed in those canopies for a quick rest on their great migration. Those same trees also provide shelter to animals, as well help the soil survive heavy rains and keep the rivers cool for our trout. When surrounded by nature, it is easy to forget how many Americans do not have access to such a resource.

In West Virginia, our citizens are already blessed with immense wealth. Not because of the health status of our people but because the abundant access to nature through the state park system. Our parks are treasures that many states lack and many of us overlook. Escaping the daily stresses of our lives is achievable in only a short drive from any city in the Mountain State. If you need some tranquility and peace, you can find it with a quick hike in any one of our 37 state parks. There is no doubt we can do

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a better job highlighting the quality of our parks, but we would be missing a great opportunity to combine our access to recreation with other healthy habits.

Healthy eating habits are one area, we as West Virginians, could do a better job of reinforcing. These habits start with eating fresh, local, healthier produce. To increase access to these products, we must teach producers and chefs to work together. We cannot promote localized eating if we do not have the capabilities of meeting increased demands. The chef and the farmer must understand the logistics of each operation. For the first time, the West Virginia Department of Agriculture, the West Virginia Department of Natural Resources and the West Virginia Farmers Markets Association are teaming up to tackle this challenge. By creating an avenue for producers and restaurants to work together, we are starting the conversation of how to increase the access of fresh foods to our citizens.

Hosting farm-to-table dinners at state parks is a clear win for the Mountain State. Combine fresh food with exploring natural treasures and you have a recipe for healthy living. Healthier citizens lead to happier, fuller lives. We believe finding this balance can only lead to great things for West Virginia. Partnerships like this can and will help West Virginia combat rising health care costs while providing some much-needed diversification to our economy. This type of out of the box thinking that will help turn our state around.

The famous American landscape architect John Nolen once said, “Simple recreation in the open air amid beautiful surrounding contribute to physical and moral health, to a saner and happier life.” Let’s follow Nolen’s advice. Let’s work towards a healthier West Virginia by utilizing the great outdoors to inspire healthier lives.

Kent A. Leonhardt
West Virginia Commissioner of Agriculture

The West Virginia Department of Agriculture protects plant, animal and human health through a variety of scientific, regulatory and consumer protection programs. The Commissioner of Agriculture is one of six statewide elected officials who sits on the Board of Public Works.

