



State Gem: Fossil Coral Comes from Land's Oceanic Past

[Rick Steelhammer](#)

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CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- About 330 million years ago, as the ocean began to recede from the eastern portion of the land mass that makes up present-day West Virginia, limestone began to form around sections of coral reefs, protecting them from exposure to the elements during the millennia to follow. These days, while most West Virginians do their beachcombing in Myrtle Beach, mementoes of the Mountain State's oceanic prehistory can still be found in portions of Greenbrier and Pocahontas counties. There, the Hillsdale limestone formation preserves ancient reefs of West Virginia coral -- or *Lithostrotionella*, in the nomenclature of geology -- for generations to come.

This year [1990], after a struggle that supporters were beginning to fear would stretch into the next geological era, the Legislature passed a **concurrent resolution adopting West Virginia fossil coral as the official state gem.** "For 10 years, we've been trying to get it named the official state mineral," said James Guthrie, of St. Albans, a member of the Kanawha Rock & Gem Club. "We'd make it through the House, but until this year, we'd never make it through the Senate." The problem, Guthrie said, was that members of the Senate "never seem to take the

proposal seriously." "But if it wasn't for rocks, people couldn't live," he said.

"The soil contains dissolved minerals that people need. We take them in through the crops we plant." In addition to giving West Virginia minerals the official respect they deserve, the naming of a state mineral serves as an economic development vehicle as well, Guthrie said.

"Forty-four other states had an official mineral before we named ours," he said. "There are thousands and thousands of rockhounds out there."

Word of West Virginia's official gem selection has already been sent to amateur mineralogy publications, including Lapidary Journal, the avocation's bible. "Rockhound clubs take a lot of field trips, and I'm sure there will be plenty of trips made to Greenbrier and Pocahontas counties," said Guthrie, whose own club has recently made trips to Georgia, North Carolina, Ohio and Tennessee. Rockhounds, who are used to out-of-the-way locales and don't require fancy hotels or four-star restaurants, pump money into local economies without requiring investments to accommodate them. **Finding West Virginia's official gem isn't all that tricky, once you know where to look for it**, Guthrie said. "In some places there's so much of it, farmers throw it down sinkholes to get it out of the way," he said. "Some pieces, called 'coral heads,' weigh as much as 15 pounds. The denser the coral, the more valuable it is. "In areas where the gem is known to exist, rock quarries and plowed fields are the prime scouting locales. West Virginia fossil coral's color ranges from light blue to dark blue-gray, and from pink to red. When tumbled and polished, it can be fashioned into belt buckle ornaments and other eye-catching jewelry items.