

Colorado group wants to protect public lands from over-crowding

July 16 2024, by John Meyer, The Denver Post



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When an unprecedented collaboration of northern Colorado public lands agencies set out last winter to gauge the depth of public concern over increasingly crowded parks and forests along the Front Range, one thing

stood tall, like Longs Peak lit in gold at sunrise.

Surging visitation fueled by Front Range population growth, and its impact on sensitive public lands, is alarming to those who adore Colorado's outdoors.

"Nobody wants the status quo," said Steve Coffin, executive director of NoCo Places, a group comprised of representatives from federal, state and county land managers who first came together seven years ago to tackle those challenges. "Everybody wants the future to look different than it does today."

NoCo, which stands for Northern Colorado, was officially formed in 2019 but members began meeting informally in 2017. Since then, representatives of Rocky Mountain National Park, the Arapaho and Roosevelt National Forests, the northeast region of Colorado Parks and Wildlife and five counties—Jefferson, Larimer, Boulder, Clear Creek and Gilpin—have met monthly.

That huge swath of the state includes four fourteeners (Longs, Mount Blue Sky, Grays and Torreys), Clear Creek Canyon, Golden Gate Canyon State Park, Eldorado Canyon, Red Feather Lakes, Boyd Lake, Brainard Lake and Rocky Mountain National Park, the nation's fifth busiest with more than 4.1 million visitors in 2023. Members say they believe NoCo is the only collaboration of federal, state and county land management agencies of its kind in the U.S.

NoCo will soon publish a comprehensive "Conservation and Recreation Vision" action plan setting out specific goals. They will include adopting similar approaches across jurisdictions to issues like camping, campsite management and unauthorized trails. It also will educate visitors on the region's indigenous and cultural history.

"You hear a lot of complaints—people hiking in a conga line up these trails, people going off the trail, impacts to wildlife and the environment," Coffin said. "We want people outdoors, of course. It's important for mental health, physical health. It goes to the core of who we are as Coloradans. But we've got to do something to manage this differently, to manage it better, in order to protect those things that make this such a special place."

The population of the northern Colorado urban corridor is expected to hit 6.3 million by 2050, putting additional pressure on already crowded forests, trails, parks and open spaces.

"We're not making any more wildlife habitat or natural spaces," said Shannon Schaller, deputy regional manager for the northeast region of Colorado Parks and Wildlife.

"What we have, we want to do a good job of protecting for the future. We're going to have more people, more development and more impacts on the natural world. Managing what we have, as best we can, is really important so that in the future we're not living through the regret of not having done it now."

NoCo members say collaboration and sharing information are key, because while they administer different jurisdictions, they confront many of the same problems.

"Whether you're Larimer County or Rocky Mountain National Park, everybody is seeing a boom in outdoor recreation," said Gary Ingram, superintendent of Rocky Mountain National Park.

"What does that mean? What are the impacts? This park has been working for five years trying to mitigate those impacts, with this influx in population. NoCo deals not just with that, they're also dealing with

fire, looking at issues that impact gateway communities."

Impacts include full parking lots, crowded trails, trash and human waste left behind by visitors, among others. In addition, ecosystems are stressed and climate change raises the risk of extreme fire, flood and drought.

"We recognize as a state agency that we share a lot of the same challenges with our county partners and our federal partners," Schaller said. "Rather than trying to duplicate efforts, we can get a lot more done working together."

After Rocky Mountain National Park introduced timed-entry reservation requirements in 2020, other agencies considered similar tools. Now reservations are required to access parking lots on Mount Blue Sky, a program that involves the Arapaho and Roosevelt National Forests, Denver Mountain Parks and CDOT.

Arapaho and Roosevelt instituted a reservation requirement at heavily used Brainard Lake Recreation Area. Parks and Wildlife implemented a parking reservation requirement for Eldorado Canyon State Park south of Boulder.

"I don't think reservation systems are going away anytime soon, and will probably be used more widely across this region," Schaller said. "We have Rocky Mountain National Park to thank for that."

Managers of county open spaces near the foothills are part of NoCo because they also deal with overflowing parking lots and crowded trails.

"We can easily see the commonalities that we have, and some of the nuances and differences that we have," said Tom Hoby, director of parks and open space for Jefferson County.

"That is really helpful in looking at solutions collaboratively and saying, 'Rocky is doing timed-entry to reduce crowding at their entrances, would that work for Jefferson County Open Space?' Probably not, because we're not a gated system like Rocky. But, what could work for us is peak-hour parking reservations. Not to say we're going to do that, but it starts to get everyone thinking about how those management situations would manifest in your jurisdiction."

Hoby says the biggest challenges facing Front Range land managers are high visitation and the impact of users who do not understand the principles of trail etiquette, courtesy and stewardship of the natural landscape.

"That's on us, in the public lands world," Hoby said, "We need to do a better job of working with each other, working with our partners, working with various media sources to really teach folks, 'It isn't just you going off trail, it's you and everybody else that's going to follow you that is going to cause more bare-ground erosion, impact wildlife, impact vegetation.'"

Colorado public land managers saw a marked increase in resource damage when COVID brought out throngs of new visitors who either had never been educated in outdoor ethics or didn't care to be bound by them.

"You know that people generally aren't intentionally trying to do things that wreck the natural world," Schaller said. "You just have to give them the tools to understand how to do that best so they have a good experience, and the next person has a good experience."

NoCo has created some tools to educate visitors, help them understand what is at stake, and find ways to get away from the most crowded places. It has developed an interactive map that provides a view of

selected public lands, information about those areas, and links to the official information pages for those areas. It also outlines stewardship practices and facts about plants, animals and geology.

"The intention is to give them a place to go, but also to spread people out," Schaller said. "If one spot gets advertised, it draws everybody in, but there's a place maybe 20 miles down the road or a little bit further that offers that same experience and doesn't have the same kind of congestion."

NoCo also worked with the Colorado Natural Heritage Program at Colorado State University to develop a Conservation Summary map showing the range of biodiversity in the region and identifying areas of critical habitat and conservation concern. These and other NoCo projects and goals are outlined on its website.

"All of us in this profession, it breaks our heart when we see public lands degraded for whatever reason," said Jeffco's Hoby. "We're all dedicated to the same thing. Ken Burns says our national parks are America's greatest idea. I would broaden that to say public lands are America's greatest idea, whether they are a neighborhood park in New York City or Rocky Mountain National Park. They all matter."

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Citation: Colorado group wants to protect public lands from over-crowding (2024, July 16) retrieved 16 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-07-colorado-group-crowding.html>

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