

It may be time for climbers to pay up for 14ers access

[DAN ENGLAND](#),

I no longer climb nearly as many mountains as I used to thanks to my three little ones. But the five years I spent chasing the 14ers were some of the best of my life.

Those memories, to me, are priceless.

Just maybe not any longer.

You've probably heard the U.S. Forest Service is hoping to charge us a fee and even require a permit to access the South Colony Basin. This basin is a base camp for four of the state's 14ers: the Crestones, Kit Carson and Humboldt.

If I had to pick an area that was my favorite from all the 14ers I climbed – and I finished them in 2005 – the South Colony Basin just might be it. The view of Crestone Needle next to the South Colony lakes is almost as iconic a shot as the Maroon Bells in Aspen, and they're fun to climb. I can see why the Forest Service chose to float its idea of charging for access to this area first. It's worth the money.

By now we should know the free ride is over. It was a fun ride: I paid for access to one 14er during my quest – if you don't count the money I spent on gas, equipment and post-hike cheeseburgers – and that was \$150 for the privately owned Culebra and its sister peak, Red Mountain.

The rest of our 14ers need the money as well. One of my many memories of my quest comes from a climb of Kit Carson, only it's not a pleasant one. Climbers' trails, or trails made from people like me, braided the mountain like varicose veins. I remember feeling guilty as I made my way up.

Organizations such as the Rocky Mountain Field Institute and the Colorado Fourteeners Initiative and their many volunteers have helped build terrific new trails on limited budgets. I remember using the wonderful new trail built by CFI up Pyramid. When I got home, I made a small donation.

But maintaining those trails will be expensive, and many other 14ers need a lot of work. Quite frankly, that's not a priority when the state is so broke that education funding is viewed as a luxury.

California charges for a permit up the famous Mount Whitney. Washington charges for a permit up Mount Rainier. We're overdue.

I do, however, have some problems with the plan, and the first is charging hikers as much as \$20 for a trip. When you charge too much, you have unintended consequences.

I have another memory of Kit Carson. I remember running down the trail back to my tent after my summit because of black clouds and the distant sounds of thunder. Lightning, especially above tree line, is deadly. But as I ran down, I dodged dozens on their way up.

It's hard enough to get hikers to give up and try the peak another day, given the time, effort and, yes, gas money they've invested into climbing it. I can't imagine persuading them to throw away their \$20 along with that. I imagine they won't.

A \$20 fee might also encourage more hikers to camp, which adds to erosion, or even trying dangerous traverses of the peaks in order to “get their money's worth.”

I also worry about our state's aforementioned budget crunch and if the state might dip into the "14ers fund."

Finally, a permit system, I have to admit, would make me sad, even if it may be the only way to collect the money. I climbed Kit Carson on a whim when plans to guide Longs Peak fell through. Part of the joy of climbing the 14ers comes in last-minute plans coming together. Climbers have, at best, a four-month window to summit, and many times snow conditions and poor weather cut that time in half.

But maybe my fears can be fixed. I'd propose a \$10 fee for a flexible permit that a hiker could use all summer, even more than once if need be, for the South Colony Basin. If it works, I'd be willing to pay for other permits for access to other areas.

I don't relish the idea of paying for what seems like the last free, fun activity on Earth. Then again, those three little ones have already used their limited vocabularies to express an interest in climbing mountains. And I want to make sure they get their chance.

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