

High Country News

For people who care about the West

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Live fee or die

by David Feela

We grumbled, but paid the nearly 50 percent fee increase for registering our motor vehicle in Colorado. And we also paid the registration fee for our camp trailer, which had nearly doubled. I felt as helpless as Jack in the Beanstalk, when he hid under a bucket listening to a giant stomp around shouting, "FEE-FI-FO-FUM."

Fees paid, we decided to go camping at our favorite state park on Colorado's Western Slope. We paid our entrance fee and started looking around for a good campsite. Then we were hit up for the overnight camping fee. And then my wife gave me the news: "Guess what?"

I sighed: "Don't tell me there's a toilet paper fee."

"No, I saw a motorhome with a toad threaten to turn a park personnel into a dwarf."

Let me explain: When a motorhome tows a vehicle, the attachment is referred to as a toad. Last year, Colorado state parks began requiring the driver to pay the vehicle entrance fee twice -- once for the motor home, and a second time for the toad that's being pulled. Many other states did, and do, the same. RVers are understandably upset by the increased fee, which is why the motorhome owner was berating the ranger. Fortunately for us, our trailer has no engine, so it's not a toad. Neither are fifth wheels, horse trailers or pop-up campers. These require no additional fees, and there's so little left in this culture that doesn't come with a fee, I felt like kissing my trailer, cutely named a Scamp.

But I didn't want to kiss the toad. No telling what it would turn into.

Meanwhile, the policy of charging a daily use fee on top of a camping fee is just the same rabbit coming out of a different hat. It might make better sense if the Chinese bought all our motorhomes, like they did with all our Hummers, but what can I say? I'm Scamping instead of tenting.

We have become a culture of feelers, which is not that different from freeloaders. By definition, a freeloader is "a person who takes advantage of others' generosity without giving anything in return." Colorado state parks, for instance, have decided -- according to park officials -- to stave off funding deficits by "program reductions, small fee increases and shorter hours at certain state parks." More fees, fewer services. Sounds like feelloading to me.

Such tactics for increasing revenue are being used all across the West, and Colorado state parks are only following the same corporate model that sectors of American business have been abusing for generations. It amounts to this kind of thinking: Generate more revenue by reducing the quality of the product, then pass an illusion of innovation on to the consumer. That is why we often find goods and even federal agencies like the Minerals Management Service repackaged and relabeled as "new and improved."

I wouldn't be surprised if campers all across America eventually find their sites reclassified as "suites,"

requiring additional fees if campers occupy both the sleeping and the campfire quarters of their portion of dirt.

I can also imagine a strategy that breaks down the concept of fees into its components. Perhaps every time you see a park sign, you could be assessed a recognition fee, to help pay for the rising cost of advertising for the state's tourism dollars. When you enter the park, you could be charged a hourly use fee, which offsets the hourly wage all park employees are still required by law to be paid. Naturally, there will be an overnight fee if you intend to stay, and if you use water provided by the park, a water fee may be applicable. Toilet fees would be impractical, because nobody wants to encourage random peeing in the woods.

Maybe the problem with living in a fee-enriched economy is forgetting that the public is growing fee weary. We are all towing that economic toad, and brother, it's heavy.

Isn't it time someone concluded that a fee increase ought to come with some kind of improvement in product or service? I like the advertised notion that staying at your local park is as easy as camping in your own backyard, but really, I paid my latest county tax assessment and I'm already being charged an additional fee to park in my own driveway.

Fee-free at last is my new mantra.

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