Proposed Fees to Climb Colorado’s Peaks Controversial and, Perhaps, Necessary

By Tim Sprinkle, 10-05-10

Colorado’s high mountain peaks are a study in contrasts.

On the one hand, they’re desolate, rocky places, pummeled by storms and blanketed by snow for more than half the year. On the other, they’re home to a wide variety of plant and animal species, all uniquely adapted to life on the tundra.

As if that weren’t enough, the highest of these peaks – those over 14,000 feet above sea level, a.k.a. “fourteeners” – are also some of Colorado’s most popular recreation destinations, attracting thousands of hikers and climbers every year. With those crowds come problems, of course, including trampled vegetation, erosion and other overuse damage.

And that’s exactly why the U.S. Forest Service wants to start charging hikers a fee to access several fourteeners in the southern part of the state.

A proposal issued in May of this year seeks to charge $10 per hiker and $20 per camper for access to the South Colony Basin area, a trailhead that serves four 14,000-foot climbs in Custer Country – Humboldt Peak, Kit Carson Peak, Crestone Peak and the Crestone Needle. The proposal would not place a limit on the total number of visitors allowed into the area and, if approved, wouldn’t go into effect until 2011 at the earliest.

“Managing recreational use and protecting the environment in South Colony Basin presents the USFS with many challenges not found in other backcountry locations,” the agency wrote in a statement when the proposal was introduced, “such as maintaining costly summit trails, restoring degraded alpine ecosystems, supporting search and rescue operations, and dealing with human waste. Revenue from the proposed recreation use fees will help to sustain the recreational facilities and environmental protections in the basin.”

Currently, Culebra Peak is the only fourteener in Colorado that requires an access fee due to the fact that it is located on private land.

THE OPPOSITION
Not surprisingly, the USFS proposal has drawn its fair share of criticism in the months since its release.

“It’s going to create more problems than it solves, that’s for sure,” says Kitty Benzar, president of the Durango-based Western Slope No-Fee Coalition, of the proposal.

For starters, she explains, imposing a fee will deflect hiker traffic from the east side of the basin to the west, shifting use from public easements to private lands and exacerbating an existing trespassing problem in the area. Beyond that, she says her group worries that the proposal will alter attitudes toward public land use.

“When you rent a car you probably don’t wash it before you turn it in, right? It’s a market transaction. But you’d probably wash a friend’s car after you borrowed it. The moment you change the experience into ‘I bought a ticket to be here, it’s someone else’s problem to take
care of it,’ I think it has a net negative effect on the public lands that are an important part of our heritage.”

Lloyd Athern, Executive Director of the Colorado Fourteeners Initiative, a conservation group that maintains trails on the high peaks, agrees, saying that he worries a fee will discourage outside groups from contributing money or participating in stewardship work.

“You probably have $1 million a year that goes into maintaining these peaks,” he says. “A portion of that comes from the Forest Service, but the vast majority comes from private groups and users. If people are forced to pay fees for access, will that diminish their willingness to contribute otherwise?”

And, of course, displacement is a universal concern.

“For us, designing and maintaining a sustainable summit route can take three years and easily cost $300,000. If you restrict access, does that cause people who want to climb these peaks and don’t want to pay the fee to create other routes? If they end up trampling areas that we need to go back and eventually restore—creating damage that would requires another $300,000-$400,000 in remediation – does it really pay off?”

STATE OF THE FOURTEENERS

As far as the peaks themselves are concerned, however, the USFS proposal is coming from a real place. The ecosystem at 14,000 feet is very fragile and overuse is a true problem in certain areas, particularly those summits that have easy, almost drive-up access.

“There is plenty of scientific data that shows how the effect of a human walking across the tundra is very different from someone walking across the grass in Denver or Fort Collins,” explains Ryan Hollamby, a graduate student in the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs, who has spent the past year climbing almost every one of Colorado’s 54 fourteeners. “The high country ecosystems are very fragile.”

In particular, Hollamby says, crowds at high elevations contribute greatly to increased erosion and overall pollution, both in the form of human waste and general hiker garbage. Beyond that is the sometimes unseen impact that use can have on animal movements.

“When we see bighorns down by campsites, people don’t think about how they’re changing the animals’ movements and their behaviors,” Hollamby says, explaining that many high country species are attracted to the salt found in human urine. “But we’re altering their patterns more than many people realize by not practicing good, ethical hiking.”

TOWARD A SOLUTION

But will a fee help solve the problem? So far, the consensus is “no.” Although something needs to be done to better protect the fourteeners, most watchers feel that a fee is not the best way to go about it.

“Any person who goes up [to the basin] on a busy weekend will understand why the Forest Service is doing what they’re doing,” says Hollamby, “It’s a mess up there. But there are better ways to combat it – making approaches longer, making trailheads less accessible.”
For now, though, hikers will have to just wait and see what happens as the USFS works through its approval process.

“The Forest Service’s San Carlos District has been soliciting public comment on South Colony Basin, which provides access to Crestone Peak, Crestone Needle and Humboldt Peak,” says Maribeth Gustafson, Deputy Regional Forester of the USFS Rocky Mountain Region. “The public input will be valuable to the Forest Service in determining how we will manage the recreation opportunities and unique natural resources in the area,”

Either way, some sort of change is coming.

“As Colorado grows, certainly there will be changes over time in how we recreate,” says the Colorado Fourteeners Initiative’s Atern. “We as Americans are used to going out and communing in nature, and that’s a very good thing. How we take care of these areas and make good use of them is something that I think we’re all grappling with.”

[End of article]

Comment By brien, 10-05-10

No! The problem is overuse. If there is a problem with overuse, limit the numbers through check-in systems, or limited camping areas with big fines to camp outside those areas. But to impose fees, as nominal as they seem to some people, they are really taking away the spirit of why we go to these places. They are ours to use by birthright (as citizens of both the world and the USA) and should not cater only to those who can pay their way. Of the great adventurers, explorers and literary giants who have gone to these places in search of something that money can't buy, many would not have been able to afford these constant fees. Raise taxes, change spending priorities (military to outdoors may be good start) and put limits on the use using reservations, established campsites, etc. But don't charge. That needs to end now.

Comment By Jake, 10-05-10

I would pay the fee. I think anybody that cares about this area and what the intentions of the National Forest are would want to pay the fee. Point blank, there should not even be an opposition, problem solved...

This article was printed from www.newwest.net at the following URL:
http://www.newwest.net/topic/article/proposed_fees_to_climb_colorados_peaks_controversial_and