

STEVINSON WILD WILD WEST USED CAR SUPER SALE TWICE AS BIG GOLDEN LONGMONT THU-FRI-SAT JULY 26-27-28 OPEN UNTIL 9PM HUGE SELECTION

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OUTDOOR EXTREMES

# Saving precious fourteeners in Colorado given high priority

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The Denver Post

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CFI trail crew members Rachael Hudson and Chris Houde use teamwork to clear a trail off Flat Creek in the Mount of the Holy Cross Wilderness Area.

## MOUNT OF THE HOLY CROSS WILDERNESS AREA —

Every few steps along the rocky, rooty Flat Creek trail up to Notch Mountain and Mount of the Holy Cross, Ben Hanus huddles over his GPS, studying and tapping the gizmo. In 3 miles, he has stopped 165 times.

He looks bafflingly lost.

"I get that a lot," he says, describing how hikers often wave, holler and point to the trail when they see him. "It's way easier to say thanks than explain."



Ben Hanus of the 18-year-old Colorado Fourteeners Initiative — www.14ers.org — records trail deterioration along the Flat Creek trail that climbs to Notch Mountain and accesses Mount of the Holy Cross.

The explanation — indeed difficult in the thin air of Colorado's fourteeners — involves Hanus taking waypoints of trail damage such as erosion and braiding, snapping pictures, prescribing remedies to prevent further deterioration, estimating the hours required for those remedies and even noting the distance to nearby stones that trail builders in his wake could use to shore up shifting soil in the tender, above-treeline tundra. "In a way, I guess I am a trail doctor," says the sustainable trails project coordinator for the Colorado

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If Colorado's beloved fourteeners are being loved to death by hordes of hikers — as former Gov. Richard Lamm once grimly warned — Hanus' data will quantify the impact of that loving embrace.

The CFI's new Sustainable Trails project is an ambitious program to document and inventory every step of the 24 heavily trafficked routes the group has rebuilt on 22 of the state's highest peaks. On the state's most hiked fourteener, Mount Bierstadt, Hanus documented more than 300 features that require repair in the first mile of the short trail to the peak.

That data, analyzed in the winter, support how donor dollars and various grants protect the state's most treasured trails. The project provides evidence showing how trails deteriorate under the waffle-treaded stomp of thousands of hikers and how much effort and money is required to maintain what essentially are Colorado's loftiest capital assets.

The 18-year-old CFI employs 13 specially trained field workers, who this summer are directing more than 30 Youth Corps workers on trails across three peaks: Mount of the Holy Cross, North Maroon Peak and San Luis Peak. Crew leaders will hike the equivalent of Mount Everest three times every season, scrambling between base camps and work sites. Hauling 3 to 4 tons of equipment and supplies to each work site, the initiative can spend \$100,000 to \$150,000 on each trail every summer. Most of those projects require three or four summers of work.

"Now you are looking at an asset worth \$300,000 to \$450,000 or more," says Lloyd Athearn, executive director of the Colorado Fourteeners Initiative.

The data, born of donors' queries into how the group sets its priorities for trail projects and investment, are essential for charting the group's work.

"This gives us solid, quantifiable information that guides where we need to focus our investment and funds," Athearn says.

The technology-driven Sustainable Trails project taps the tools of two centuries. While Hanus tickles his Trimble GPS on the trail that leads to Mount of the Holy Cross, a team downtrail labors with shovels, awls, axes and cross saws in federal wilderness that bans machinery.

"Best job in the world," says Rachael Hudson, an eight-year CFI trail builder as limbs blocking the trail fall under her ax's perfectly placed blows. In the past two days, Hudson and her team — one of the CFI's roving trail crews working for the next couple weeks on the trails spilling from Mount of the Holy Cross, spending their nights in far-from-anywhere tents — have hand-sawed 47 trees that fell across the trail last winter.

It's an interesting mix of old-school and high-tech work. The primitive hand tools are coupled with GPS units, solar panels and satellite phones. [The CFI website \(14ers.org\)](http://www.14ers.org) is welling with videos and blog posts sharing the group's latest work to court donors from 39 states.

"We know we are competing for donor dollars," Athearn says. "How can we leverage technology to tell our story and keep people connected and engaged?"

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