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Colorado Fourteeners Initiative rates state's tallest peaks, estimates \$24 million restoration cost



Volunteers transport a large rock by hand to the project site where it will be used to build a rock staircase on the Quandary Peak summit trail.



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Ben Hanus conducts a detailed, GPS-based inventory of the Notch Mountain Trail on Mount of the Holy Cross.



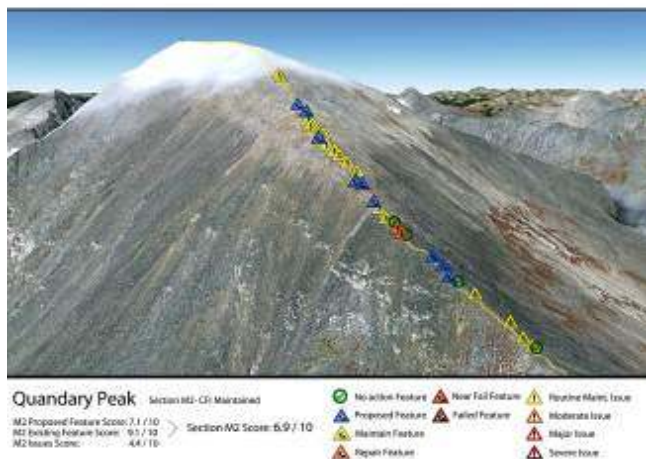
Volunteers work to narrow an excessively wide section of the Quandary Peak trail through use of plug transplants.



OLYMPUS DIGITAL CAMERA



A Google Earth visualization of the Quandary Peak trail showing the condition of existing trail features, the condition of current natural resource problems, and the need for additional installed trail features.



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Colorado Fourteeners Initiative report card

For more information about CFI, to view the report card or donate, visit www.14ers.org

Friends of the Dillon Ranger District will organize a volunteer trail-maintenance day for Quandary Peak on August 15. Find more information at www.fdrd.org

Groups of people interested in single or multi-day volunteer projects with CFI should contact Ben Hanus at Ben@14ers.org

After three years of high-altitude hiking, painstaking data collection and complicated algorithmic number crunching, the Colorado Fourteeners Initiative has released a report card detailing the state of 42 trails on 39 of Colorado's 54 peaks at or over 14,000 feet. The takeaway? There's a lot of work to be done.

Overall, CFI estimates that reconstruction and renovation of the studied trails will cost about \$24 million. Broken down, about \$6 million would be required to bring 26 Forest Service-planned trails to sustainable conditions, while the remaining \$18 million would go toward creating 16 completely new trails in areas that currently only feature unplanned, hiker-created routes.

Of the 42 surveyed trails, only four received an "A" grade, meaning they are well-constructed and only require general maintenance, with a price tag less than \$125,000 each. The rest ranged from "B" to "F," with various levels of disrepair and difficulty.

The East Slopes trail of Quandary Peak received a "C+" grade, with an estimated \$500,000 to nearly \$1 million associated cost. The Stevens Gulch trail for Grays and Torreys peaks received a "D" grade, with a similar price tag. The unplanned Blue Lakes trail on Quandary received a

“C.”

“Very few of them are in shape where they’d be comfortable going home to their parents and showing the report card,” Lloyd Athearn, executive director of CFI, said with a laugh.

Jokes aside, the issue of the state of the 14er trails is one which Athearn and his colleagues take seriously. After releasing the report card to the public, the organization is now working toward fundraising and maintenance efforts.

CREATING THE REPORT

“We’ve been in this business of building and maintaining 14er trails and educating 14er hikers for over 20 years,” said Athearn, of CFI, which is a nonprofit organization that started in 1994. “We decided that it would be a good thing to take a snapshot of where we are and how the trails we built are holding up and how the peaks where we haven’t been able to build sustainable trails are doing without a trail.”

CFI field programs manager Ben Hanus is the boots behind the numbers. Since 2011, he has been hiking Colorado’s 14ers and collecting thousands of points of data about the trail conditions for the report card.

“It was a really incredible opportunity to get to know these trails that we work on every year so intimately,” he said.

He catalogued more than 20,350 data points for the GIS (geographic information system) database on 10 different factors, including trail width, erosion, existing trail features and nearby materials for potential new features.

Before the data collection, CFI had to rely mainly on word-of-mouth to know the trail conditions, Hanus said, which was rough information with few details. Now, he can tell a crew an exact location, down to the GPS coordinates, of places needing work or locations to gather materials.

“To be able to say with absolute certainty what needs to happen on the trail is the coolest tool,” he said.

He and Athearn worked together, creating and using complicated algorithms to boil the thousands of data points Hanus had collected into a simple, understandable method of consumption. The report card is public on CFI’s website, with further breakdowns peak by peak. As more information is gathered, it will also be available for public viewing, Athearn said.

PLANNING MATTERS

“What was surprising to me was really the huge difference that is made when you’re able to construct a sustainable route,” said Athearn, of what stood out to him from the reports.

When CFI was first organized in 1994, there were only two formally-planned trails going up 14er peaks — one on Long’s Peak and one on Pike’s Peak.

“All the others were just informal routes trampled into the tundra,” he added.

Now, a lot of what CFI crews do is re-route previously unplanned trails into better, more environmentally-suitable and sustainable routes and work to erase the damage left by the unplanned trail.

“We’re maintaining very unsustainable trails,” Hanus said.

The difference on the report card is clear. While most of the planned trails range from “A” to “C” grades, all of the unplanned trails start at “C” and decline from there. Eight of them have “F” grades.

Not only are planned trails easier to maintain, but they protect the fragile alpine and subalpine environment around them.

“The vegetation that grows on these high altitude peaks are really the astronaut plants of the earth,” Athearn said. “They are just out there at the edge of where life grows on this planet, and they’re well adapted to that, but they’re very, very sensitive to trampling. ... The goal is with these formal trails, we can protect the environmental resource at the same time we’re protecting the hiking resource.”

Unlike lower elevations, the alpine environment takes much longer to recover, Hanus said. He feels that the key is educating hikers on the unique aspect of the alpine region.

“Once people start to understand these things, it’s like, ‘Well, of course I wouldn’t want to head up this trail and compromise this slope,’” he said.

‘APPROACHABLE EVERESTS’

Summit County’s nearest 14er peaks are Quandary, Grays and Torreys. While all three experience heavy hiker traffic, CFI estimates that Quandary is the second-most hiked 14er in the state — in the 2014 summer season, the peak averaged 692 visitors each week. That dubious distinction comes with a variety of challenges, and the popularity isn’t going to change anytime soon.

“They’re kind of the approachable Everests,” Athearn said of Colorado’s 14ers. On them, people can have experiences that they never would have anywhere else. The important thing is that people understand the fragile nature of the places they’re visiting, which can be difficult when

they only see them once or twice over the course of many years, or perhaps only once ever.

“People oftentimes have very limited snapshots in time in which they’re on a mountain,” he said, “and they have a hard time fathoming the cumulative impact of all the people who will climb a mountain over a year.”

He and his colleagues can certainly understand the draw to these majestic mountains, having chosen to make working on them their careers. He said he isn’t interested in limiting hikers on the 14ers and doesn’t believe that would really solve any problems. He and others at CFI hope that the growing love for Colorado’s 14ers will inspire people to contribute to their cause.

“The vast majority of our funding comes from private sources, foundations, businesses, individual hikers through the country,” he said. “Our hope is that explaining the need and documenting this in great detail and saying look, there’s been a lot of thought behind this, it will spur those parties who have a vested interest in protecting these peaks because they’re their playgrounds or because they’re a local tourist attraction that draws people to the community.”

Silverthorne resident and former director of CFI Warren Buettner also emphasized the importance of the 14ers to local economies.

“Colorado 14ers have become a very serious part of our tourism, a tourist destination for many people, so they have a lot of economic impacts for Colorado,” he said.

He’s also seen the crowds heading towards the summits firsthand, through his job and through volunteering with the CFI’s Peak Stewards program.

“These mountains are just being loved to death,” he said.

LENDING A HAND

While monetary donations are always appreciated, CFI also relies on volunteers each summer season for trail restoration and maintenance. The work is physically demanding, as it not only takes place at 14,000 feet, but the high altitude requires much to be done by hand. Power tools are not used, and rocks that weigh 300 pounds and more are often transported by hand through slings and winch systems.

Most volunteer opportunities are for one day. CFI hires crews for the more arduous, multi-day projects that require backcountry camping. Because it is so close to town in Summit County, Quandary Peak often benefits from local volunteers.

Overall, Athearn hopes that the work by the CFI helps impart to others the importance of the 14ers and in taking care of them.

“I’d like (people) to take away that these peaks are really special,” Athearn said, “they’re an integral part of Colorado and our mountain communities and our outdoor lifestyle, that there’s a lot of effort required in time and money to protect these peaks, and the great recreational experiences they offer and that this report card helps us track how well we’ve done in the past and what we need to do in the future to make sure these mountains are still great attractive recreational destinations in the decades ahead. It’s a great place to be doing work and a great cause to be working on. It’s something that really drives us. These peaks are really spectacular and deserve our help.”

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